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# Stress, Coping Strategies, and Marital Satisfaction in Spouses of Military Service Members

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Stress, Coping Strategies, and Marital Satisfaction in Spouses of Military Service

Members

Submitted by Charlene M. Haapala

May, 2012

MSW Clinical Research Paper

The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrated facility with basic social research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present their findings. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

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**Abstract**

The literature emphasizes that civilian spouses of military service members experience significant stress, utilize coping strategies, and experience marital issues. A survey of civilian spouses ( $N = 10$ ) of military service members identified levels of perceived stress, common coping strategies, and marital satisfaction. The focus of this study was to examine the relationship between perceived stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction. There were not enough participants in this study to determine these relationships. Descriptive statistics show averages of low perceived stress, and high marital satisfaction. Coping strategies most often used by civilian spouses were active coping, positive reframing, planning, and acceptance. The limitations of the study were examined, and suggestions for future research were discussed.

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**Table of Contents**

<b>I.</b>	Introduction.....	6
<b>II.</b>	Literature Review.....	8
<b>III.</b>	Conceptual Framework.....	20
<b>IV.</b>	Methods.....	22
<b>V.</b>	Results.....	35
<b>VI.</b>	Discussion.....	40
<b>VII.</b>	References.....	52
<b>VIII.</b>	Appendices.....	59

**List of Tables and Figures**

Table 1.....39

## Stress, Coping Strategies, and Marital Satisfaction in Spouses of Military Service Members

Since the 9/11 attacks, there have been over 2 million service members that have gone through deployments (Darwin, 2011). During combat many military service members are involved in and endure many stressful events throughout their deployments (Zeber, Noel, Pugh, Copeland, & Parchman, 2010). Consequently, service members face significant mental and physical challenges as a result of their military combat and service, which can include depression, chronic pain, and PTSD (O'Donnell, Begg, Lipson, & Elvander, 2011). Returning service members may also suffer from traumatic brain injuries. It is estimated that there are many veterans who are suffering from traumatic brain injuries that are falsely diagnosed, because the symptoms are so similar to PTSD (Jordan, 2011). Along with these potential concerns are issues that emerge when veterans return home and begin the process of reintegration. These challenges include problems with intimacy, communication, and role changes between the soldier and civilian spouse (Bowling & Sherman, 2008).

Reintegration into the home is complicated by the fact that there has been an increase in the amount of continuous deployments and length of deployments and this has increased difficulties and put more pressure on military families (Padden, Connors, & Agazio, 2011b; Lamberg, 2008). An estimated "53% of active duty members are married" (p.286) and "58% of active duty members" (p. 286) have a family to support (O'Donnell et al., 2011). Currently, the number of family members who are dependents of service members, which includes spouses and children, is more than the number of service members in the military (O'Donnell et al., 2011). An almost inevitable challenge

that military families face is separation due to military deployment (Dimiceli, Steinhardt, & Smith, 2010).

The literature reveals that military deployments have a significant impact not only on the service member but also on the civilian spouse (Chandra, Martin, Hawkins, & Richardson, 2010; Kelley, 1994; Ternus, 2010; Bradshaw, Sudhinaraset, Mmari, & Blum, 2010). A civilian spouse is considered to be the spouse who is not in the military and is not deployed, but is married to a military service member. The literature reflects a large portion of research that focuses on the experiences of civilian wives and does not represent civilian husbands adequately. There is a need for further research to represent both male and female civilian spouses.

As a result of deployments, civilian spouses often face significant challenges including being alone (Wheeler & Stone, 2010; Lapp, Taft, Tollefson, Hoepner, Moore, & Divyak, 2010), parenting without a partner (Lapp et al., 2010), “stress or emotional problems” (Eaton et al., 2008, p. 1053), and mental health issues including depression and anxiety (Mansfield, Kaufman, Marshall, Gaynes, Morrissey, & Engel, 2010). Civilian spouses use a variety of strategies to help themselves cope with the stress of living in the military lifestyle. Some of these coping methods include: communication with service member, support from family and friends, methods of self care, spiritual commitment, and distraction (Wheeler & Stone, 2010; Lapp et al., 2010; Moelker & Kloet, 2006).

Although research indicates that civilian spouses use a variety of coping strategies to deal with the stressors of military life, there can still be difficulties in the marital relationship. Gomulka (2010) suggests the possibility that divorce rates and the depth of



marriage struggles in military couples is highly underestimated. Care for relationships is evident in the fact that many returning service members opt for family therapy over individual therapy (Khaylis, Polunsky, Erbes, Gewirtz, & Rath, 2011). This suggests that working with the at home spouse and family is needed.

Spouses are a significant support in helping prepare service members for their work (Knox & Price, 1995). It is important to identify the stressors, and levels of stress that military spouses may face, and also identify their coping strategies so that social workers and other helping professionals can assist families in navigating and meeting the demands of the military lifestyle. It is also essential to identify coping strategies that have a positive impact on marital satisfaction to promote relationship and family longevity.

The research question for this study is: What is the relationship between stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction in spouses of military service members?

### **Literature Review**

The following review of the literature examines the research in regards to the stressors and stress levels that civilian spouses experience associated with military life, the impact that stress has on civilian spouses, coping strategies used by civilian spouses, how stress and coping impact marital satisfaction, and the unique challenges faced at each stage of deployment.

#### **Stress Associated with Military Life**

**Stressors.** There are many factors that research suggests contributes to the stress that a civilian spouse experiences. Stressors may include: often moving to new locations (Knox & Price, 1995), diagnosis or symptoms of anxiety and/or depression (Mansfield et al., 2010; Lester et al., 2010), dealing with opinions of families who are against the war

(Mmari, Roche, Sudhinaraset, & Blum, 2009), and added pressure on family obligations when the service member is deployed (Dimiceli et al., 2010; Mmari et al., 2009).

One of most significant stressors in the military family is separation due to military deployments (Padden et al., 2011b). In a recent study, civilian wives assigned issues surrounding deployment as the most stressful experience they have had over the past five years (Dimiceli et al., 2010). Research further suggests that stress levels are higher in spouses of service members who are deployed than in spouses of non-deployed service members (Burton, Farley, & Rhea, 2009). In a study consisting of 300 married couples with one active duty Army husband and a civilian spouse, the highest stress levels in civilian wives were in regards to deployment related issues. These concerns include “issues related to combat, death, physical or psychological injury, loneliness, and effects on children” (Allen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2011, p. 242). The stress experienced by the civilian spouse becomes more complex if the couple has children (Wheeler & Stone, 2010).

If the civilian spouse has children, managing the household and continually fluctuating between being a single parent when their partner is deployed and co-parenting when their partner is home, can be stressful. In a qualitative study of wives of National Guard and Reserve service members, the wives spoke about the difficulties of being a single parent during deployment (Wheeler & Stone, 2010). The spouses expressed a consistent theme of having to do everything alone while their spouse was deployed (Wheeler & Stone, 2010). Other wives of National Guard and Reserve service members with parenting responsibilities indicate that their specific stressors during deployment

were financial difficulties with bills, taking care of the house alone, and never getting a break from taking care of the children (Lapp et al., 2010).

The spouses and the children's experience of strong emotions during times of deployment can often be difficult for the civilian spouse. While their partner is away, civilian spouses often find it stressful to navigate issues that come up in their children's lives during deployment such as struggles with anxiety and grief (Dimiceli et al., 2010). Furthermore, civilian spouses express that being in the role of single parent can be even more difficult if their children are teenagers as it is more challenging to conceal emotions or give simple answers to them (Lapp et al., 2010).

The length or number of deployments experienced is shown to be another source of stress for civilian spouses of the deployed (Dimiceli et al., 2010; Mmarmi et al., 2009). However, contrary research indicates that prior deployments of reserve duty husbands are indicate lower rates of stress in civilian wives (Milgram & Bar, 1993). This speaks to the possibility that with more experience, the civilian spouse may become more resilient in adjusting to separations due to deployments. (Milgram & Bar, 1993).

**Levels and impact of stress.** The high levels of stress in civilian spouses can have detrimental consequences on their lives. In a study of 940 primary care-seeking civilian spouses, Eaton et al., (2008) found that "21.7% of spouses reported that stress or emotional problems" (p. 1053) have a negative influence on their lives. This finding is reiterated in a study of civilian wives' experiences during deployment where one wife in regards to deployment stated, "It's definitely a roller coaster ride. I think that you have times that you are very afraid...times that you're very happy... times that you're stressed" (Davis, Ward, & Storm, 2011, p.55).

The stress experienced from this up and down cycle of the military life and deployment stages may be affecting civilian spouses' well being. Stress levels in civilian spouses of the military service members may be exhibited somatically (Burton et al., 2009; Padden et al., 2011b). Somatization refers to grievances regarding physical issues that are not found to be as a result of a medical problem or by use of substances (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). In a study of spouses of deployed and non-deployed service me, a positive significant relationship between stress and somatization was found (Burton et al., 2009). In spouses of the deployed, stress levels and somatization was higher than spouses of the non-deployed. The most common somatic complaints were: difficulties sleeping, back problems, problems with menstruation, low energy, and tiredness (Burton et al., 2009).

Further establishing the possible relationship between stress and physical/mental well being, another study indicates that level of perceived stress predicts level of psychological and physical health in spouses of the deployed (Padden et al., 2011b). More specifically, the "higher degree of perceived stress was associated with lower mental and physical well-being" (Padden et al., 2011b, p. 262). A high level of perceived stress also seems to be related to the civilian spouses' commitment to health and wellness. For instance, Padden, Connors, and Agazio (2011a) shows that higher perceived stress in spouses during deployment separation makes it less likely for them to exercise.

In regards to mental well being, Mansfield et al. (2010) found that longer periods of deployment was related to Army wives having a higher risk for seeking treatment and receiving a mental health diagnosis. Similarly, a study of Canadian military families

indicated that the non-deployed parent experienced high stress levels in managing problems that arise when being the only parent in the home (Hiew, 1992). Furthermore, military parents, compared to community norms, have significantly higher psychological distress which includes PTSD, anxiety, and depression (Saltzman, Lester, Beardslee, Layne, Woodward, & Nash, 2011).

Psychological stress endured by the civilian spouse can be a long lasting affair. Darwin (2011) suggests that families are significantly affected by being separated from their loved one and they can end up working through those issues for the rest of their lives. Furthermore, Eaton et al. (2008) demonstrates that the rates of mental health issues in spouses of military service members fair similarly to their deployed service member spouse. This demonstrates the need for families to receive the same treatment and care as their returning service member (Darwin, 2011).

High stress levels in civilian spouses can often relate to the severity of the deployed service members combat situation. For example, Eastman, Archer, and Ball (1990) examined combined responses of 785 husbands and wives from Navy families and found that stress levels were lower in husbands and wives who were stationed for on shore work as compared to those who were not on “shore duty” (p. 123) (Eastman et al., 1990). The effect of the deployed service member being in dangerous combat situations is evident in civilian spouses long after deployment has ended. For instance, Moelker and Kloet (2006) found a connection between the riskiness of the situation the soldier experienced while deployed and the presence of depression in civilian spouses nine months after their service member spouse returned from deployment. In addition to civilian spouses dealing with long lasting stress from deployment separations, they may

also experience “secondary traumatization” (p. 216) (Moelker & Kloet, 2006).

Secondary traumatization in regards to a military couple relationship would mean that the civilian spouse is taking on the symptoms that the service member is experiencing because of the significant events experienced during deployment (Moelker & Kloet, 2006). Overall, the literature speaks to the fact that deployments and military life can be a significant stressor causing high levels of psychological and physical stress in civilian spouses of the deployed (Moelker & Kloet, 2006; Darwin 2011).

### **Coping Strategies**

To deal with the stress of deployments, civilian spouses utilize a variety of coping strategies and they are usually very unique to the individual (McCubbin, Dahl, Lester, Benson, & Roberston, 1976).

There are certain factors that are predictive of the use of specific types of coping strategies. Padden et al. (2011b) analyzed the relationship between “stress, coping, general well-being” (p.247), in a sample of 105 female spouses of currently deployed service members, and found that army wives who had experienced previous deployments utilized “confrontive coping” (p. 261). “Confrontive coping” (p. 261) means they were able to face a situation and problem solve effectively to deal with the stress (Padden et al., 2011b).

There are coping strategies that can be beneficial to the spouse of the military service member such as having optimism (Padden et al., 2011b) however, research alludes to the fact that spouses also use negative coping strategies that may ultimately affect their overall health and well being (Padden et al., 2011a; Padden et al., 2011b). For example, in a study to examine predictors of healthy behaviors in spouses of military

service members during deployment, the length of spouses' deployment predicted differences in eating patterns (Padden et al., 2011a). Furthermore, using coping strategies that are emotion focused relates to an increase in physical problems in civilian wives (Dimiceli et al., 2010).

There are a few coping strategies used by civilian spouses of military service members that are common. A few of those coping strategies are as follows: use of social support, distraction, self-care, and communication (Dimiceli et al., 2010; Lapp et al., 2010; Moelker & Kloet, 2006).

**Social support.** During the deployment period, civilian spouses often seek support from relatives and social relationships (Wheeler & Stone, 2010; Lapp et al., 2010; Moelker & Kloet, 2006). In a qualitative study focusing on the experiences of spouses of National Guard service members during their spouse's deployment, spouses sought comfort and support from family or friends in effort to cope with the deployments (Wheeler & Stone, 2010). These spouses mentioned the following as comforting and useful for coping with the deployment: "going to visit family or having family visit them" (p. 551), and talking to and seeking advice from family and friends (Wheeler & Stone, 2010). Spouses of National Guard service members also indicate that "social support" (p. 54) is a common coping strategy particularly in the pre-deployment stage (Lapp et al., 2010). These spouses expressed seeking social support from their husbands in the pre-deployment phase (Lapp et al., 2010).

A common reason civilian spouses seek social support is emotional issues surrounding deployment. Moelker and Kloet (2006) found that 64% of civilian army wives report they prefer "emotional support" (p. 220) from family and friends to cope

with deployment. The need for emotional support is also evident in a study by Eaton et al. (2008) in which 19.3% of civilian spouses seeking primary care said they were open to accessing assistance for various issues including emotional problems.

**Distraction.** Civilian spouses indicate using distraction by keeping busy as a coping strategy (Wheeler & Stone, 2010; Lapp et al., 2010). Staying busy seems to be what helps the spouse through the time of separation from their deployed spouse. For example, “self distraction” (p. 362) was ranked fifth on a list of coping strategies most commonly used by civilian wives (Dimiceli et al., 2010). The distraction strategies that spouses indicate are keeping busy by focusing on the kids, or by immersing themselves into work around the house or their job (Wheeler & Stone, 2010; Lapp et al., 2010).

**Self care.** Civilian spouses utilize self-care activities as a coping strategy and the activities tend to vary individually (Wheeler & Stone, 2010; Lapp et al., 2010). Self care activities that are utilized include sleep, writing in a journal, and listening to music (Wheeler & Stone, 2010; Lapp et al., 2010). Others note that maintaining their spiritual beliefs is a coping strategy they use to get through the deployment process (Wheeler & Stone, 2010).

**Communication.** Other research suggests that civilian spouses use communication with the deployed spouse through phone calls, use of the internet, and written letters as a way to cope (Wheeler & Stone, 2010; Lapp et al., 2010). This seems to be a helpful coping strategy because communication during deployment is essential for couples to maintain familiarity with each other while they are apart (Moelker & Kloet, 2006).

### **Stress, Coping, and Marital Satisfaction**



**Stress and Marital Satisfaction.** In addition to research focusing on the many stressors that a civilian spouse may face, it is important to look at the possibility of how stress from military life and deployments may impact the marital relationship between the service member and the civilian spouse. In a study by Dimiceli et al. (2010), civilian wives indicated that maintaining the long distance relationship was a stressful experience. Although maintaining the long distance relationship during deployment is stressful, the separation may have a positive impact on the spousal relationship. For example, in a survey of civilian Army wives, 57% reported that as a result of the deployment, their relationship with their spouse had been strengthened and it drew them together as a couple (Moelker & Kloet, 2006).

It is evident that stress from deployment can cause issues in a marital relationship and some studies have focused specifically on the effects deployment may have on marital satisfaction (Allen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2010; Jordan, 2011; Daniel, 2011). Stress from the deployment can be experienced by the deployed service member and inadvertently affect the civilian spouses' view of the marriage and marriage satisfaction (Allen et al., 2010). For example, a recently occurring deployment was found to be related with higher levels of PTSD symptoms in service member husbands; and PTSD symptoms were negatively correlated with their civilian wives' "confidence in their marital strength" (p. 283), "dedication" to the marriage (p. 284), and "satisfaction derived from sacrificing for the spouse" (p. 284) (Allen et al., 2010).

Unfortunately, deployments seem to increase the amount of marital issues that married military couples face (Jordan, 2011). One issue is that stress from dealing with financial issues can burden relationships and possibly increase risk of divorce (Gomulka,

2010). Another issue is that stress from deployment can also have a significant effect on the intimacy between the military couple (Daniel, 2011). During the reintegration period, spousal intimacy can be an up and downhill experience. Macdermid (2006) found that a little less than half of the spouses/partners who participated in a study experienced low levels of wellness in the fourth to ninth month after the return of their service member and then back to stabilization.

**Coping Strategies and Marital Satisfaction.** Level of previous marital satisfaction in civilian spouses may be a predictor of the types of coping strategies they use. Civilian wives of service members, who had an increased amount of stress, who reported low marital satisfaction before and during deployment, would often use “anxiety reducing coping behaviors” (McCubbin et al., 1976, p. 467). Anxiety reducing coping behaviors includes: “drinking alcohol, smoking, punishing oneself, crying, getting away or withdrawing, and dating” (McCubbin et al., 1976, p. 465). In contrast, civilian wives who were past the point of having children, who reported that they are content with their marriages and with the way of military life, would use “seeking resolution and expressing of feelings” (p. 467) as coping strategies to help them through the lengthy separation from their military spouse (McCubbin et al., 1976). The coping behavior of seeking resolution and expression of feelings includes: “getting angry at the military, talking to someone about feelings, making close relationships, talking with other civilian wives experiencing the same issues, and involvement in social activities” (McCubbin et al., 1976, p.465).

One coping strategy that is often useful is keeping up communication with the deployed spouse (Lapp et al., 2010) however, greater amount of communication does not

necessarily have a positive impact on marital satisfaction. Results from a study of 105 civilian wives whose husbands were deployed indicated that the more the wives communicated with their husbands who were deployed, the less satisfaction they had with their marriage (Joseph & Afifi, 2010). Contrastingly, the more the wives spoke with their husbands about stressful situations the higher the amount of marital satisfaction the wives would indicate (Joseph & Afifi, 2010). This may suggest that civilian wives feel a sense of support and relief after they reveal the stressful issues in their life to their deployed husband and therefore view their relationship more positively (Joseph & Afifi, 2010).

The deployed spouse may also experience communication as an effective coping strategy. For deployed husbands who were highly satisfied with their marriage, a greater amount of communication with their wife at home was related to lower amounts of PTSD in the deployed husband (Carter, Loew, Allen, Stanley, Rhoades, & Markman, 2011). However, this was only true for non-immediate forms of communication such as letters or emails (Carter et al., 2011).

### **Stages of Deployment**

Each stage of the deployment cycle presents unique challenges, stressors, and levels of stress in the civilian spouses of military service members.

**Pre-Deployment.** The pre-deployment stage is defined in this study as the time from receiving the assignment up until the deployment begins. The pre-deployment phase can initiate the family into a time where family members back away from each other emotionally (Morse, 2006). The creating a distance between each other may be an attempt to shield them from the pain of the upcoming deployment separation (Morse,

2006). A continuous cycle of this “emotional distance” that occurs with frequent deployments can be damaging to the marriage relationship (Morse, 2006, p.1). Another characteristic of the pre-deployment stage is essentially having to put life on the back burner for a period of time. In a recent qualitative study conducted with a total of 18 spouses of deployed National Guard or reserve troop service members revealed that the primary stressor during the pre-deployment phase was having their “lives on hold” (p. 51) until the deployment occurred (Lapp et al., 2010). One woman expressed that her life was on hold by stating “It was horrible. We couldn’t plan vacations, we couldn’t plan anything” (Lapp et al., 2010, p.51). In addition to life on hold, the pre-deployment stage is especially difficult if the family is still working through the changes that have taken place from the last deployment (Morse, 2006). Overall, the pre-deployment stage is characterized by a process of preparation for the military service member’s departure (Lapp et al., 2010; Morse, 2006).

**Deployment.** The deployment stage is defined in this study as the time that the military service member is away from the family for training and military deployment. Civilian spouses during this time often experience loneliness (Wheeler & Stone, 2010), and role readjustment to accommodate for the deployed spouses’ absence (Lapp et al., 2010). Many civilian spouses are competent in adjusting to this stage of being away from their service member spouse due to previous experience with deployments (Morse, 2006). However, as a result of repeated deployments civilian spouses may face problems with feelings of being stretched to the limit and weary (Morse, 2006). Civilian mothers, who have children, have described coping strategies such as “putting their feelings away” to help their kids keep things optimistic during the deployment period (Mmarmi et al., p.

466, 2009). Overall, for the civilian spouse, the deployment stage is a time of readjustment and setting of family norms that accommodates for the absence of their spouse (Morse, 2006).

**Post-Deployment.** The post-deployment stage is defined in this study as the time following the return of the service member and the reintegration of the service member into the family. This post-deployment phase is often characterized by a process of family “stabilization” (Morse, 2006, p.2). Often times service members and their spouses need to relearn how to communicate with each other and navigate renegotiation of roles (Macdermid, 2006). Civilian spouses need to be prepared for the stress from combat that their service member may have experienced (Morse, 2006). Basham (2008) suggests that health professionals should view service members not as having a specific diagnosis, but in terms of having a mental injury that inhibits their ability to connect with others. Often post-deployment and pre-deployment stages have some overlap if the service member and their family are experiencing continuous side by side deployments (Morse, 2006). Overall, the post-deployment stage is characterized by a process of renegotiation of roles, and acceptance of the changes in the family dynamics before another deployment occurs (Morse, 2006).

### **Conceptual Framework**

The purpose of this study is to examine the relationships between perceived stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction in spouses of military service members. It is postulated that the amount of stress that the spouse perceives, and their utilization of various coping strategies will have an affect on how satisfied they are with their

marriage. The conceptual framework for this research study is grounded in Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) theory of stress and coping.

Rather than focusing on stress being either the cause or the reaction, Lazarus and Folkman (1984) suggest that their definition of stress is one in which focuses on "the relationship between the person and the environment, which takes into account characteristics of the person on the one hand, and the nature of the environmental event on the other" (p. 21). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) conceptualize a model of "stress", "appraisal", and "coping" that is "transactional" in nature (p. 293). Lazarus and Folkman (1984) propose in their "transactional model" (p. 293) that stress is based in individual "perception" (p. 46); specifically stress is determined by how much an individual perceives a situation as stressful. In perceiving a situation as stressful, the person is contributing "appraisal" (p. 357) towards a specific situation (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Furthermore, coping strategies can mediate the effects of the perceived stress (Lazarus, 1999). Lazarus (1999) indicates that coping strategies should not be viewed as being applicable to everyone. Usefulness of coping strategies are individually unique and strategies that may be helpful for some may not be helpful for others (Lazarus, 1999). Coping, although individually unique can be a mediator that determines the emotional result of stress (Lazarus, 1999). Since coping strategies can be a mediator between stress and the emotional result, emotions may have a possible affect on satisfaction in the marriage.

Since the nature of the military lifestyle leaves one of the spouses at home, the conceptual framework for this study is focused on how the civilian spouse copes with the

perceived stress associated with military life and in turn how that may relate to how satisfied the civilian spouse is in their relationship with their service member spouse.

### **Methods**

This methods section includes the purpose of the current study, the research design, sampling procedures, details of the protection of human subjects, details about the data collection instrument, and data analysis plan.

### **Purpose of Study**

The research has been inconsistent in providing information on how stress and coping impact marital satisfaction in military couples. Overall the research has only focused on various stressors and amount of stress inherent in military life, coping strategies utilized by spouses of military service members, and the problems that arise in marital couples in the military.

Therefore, the research question for this study was as follows: What is the relationship between stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction in spouses of military service members? The research sub questions were as follows:

- Do males and females differ in their levels of perceived stress, coping strategies, and levels of marital satisfaction?
- Do spouses with children and without children differ in their perceived stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction?
- Is there a relationship between number of deployments experienced as a couple and the variables of perceived stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction in spouses of military service members?

- Does deployment status predict stress, coping strategies, or marital satisfaction in spouses of military service members?
- Do spouses of military service members differ in their perceived stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction?
- Does perceived stress and coping strategies predict level of marital satisfaction in spouses of military service members?

### **Research Design**

The research design for this study is a quantitative data collection method. It is a single cross-sectional web-based survey using an online questionnaire, through the Qualtrics program. The questionnaire consists of three scales including the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), Brief COPE Scale, and the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale. The questionnaire includes demographical questions.

### **Sample**

The sampling frame for this study consisted of civilian spouses of military service members. In order to access participants for this study, the researcher contacted the Navy Operations Service Center and spoke with a Navy service member and requested permission to distribute surveys to spouses of military service members in the Navy. Written permission was obtained on December 13, 2011. Another form of access to participants was confirmed with an Army National Guard veteran who posted the survey link on her personal facebook page.

This was a convenient sample, and participants involved in the study were people who were currently civilian spouses of current military service members in the U.S. Navy



or another branch of the military. The approximate number of people that had an opportunity to participate in this research was around 300.

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

The researcher sought approval of the current study from the St. Catherine University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB reviews all research that involves human participants in order to protect and respect the rights and welfare of human subjects. A letter of informed consent (Appendix A) was created and followed the standards set forth by the IRB at St. Catherine University. The informed consent explained the purpose of the research, who was conducting the study, and why they were selected to participate in the study. Participants were informed of the procedures of what they were asked to do including, following the website link to the online survey and reading through the informed consent before they completed the survey. The consent form informed the participants that they would remain completely anonymous. They were informed that they were allowed to stop the survey at any time and were allowed to skip any question. The participants were informed that there were a few risks involved in participating in the study including the risk of emotional distress following the completion of the survey. As a result of the emotional risk involved in the study, participants were provided with contact information for Military One source a crisis line that they may call for consultation. Participants were also given contact information for the researcher, the faculty chair/advisor, and a contact person for the Institutional Review Board at St. Catherine University. Participants were asked to provide implied consent by reading through the informed consent and acknowledging their consent by completing the

online survey. There were no incentives or direct benefits for the participants involved in this study.

### **Data Collection**

The instrument used for data collection in this study was a survey consisting of three scales and five demographical questions. The three scales included the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS), the Brief COPE scale, and the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMS). The Perceived Stress Scale is publicly available and the authors gave permission for others to use the scale if used for nonprofit educational purposes, and such was the case in this research study. The Brief COPE scale is publicly available and the authors gave permission for others to use it on the website. The Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale is publicly available and permission was granted by Walter Schumm to use the scale in this research study.

The Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) was developed to measure the degree to which specific “situations” (p. 570) in life are seen as “stressful” (p.570) and was designed by Cohen, Kamarck, and Mermelstein (Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 1983; Cohen & Williamson, 1988; Cohen, Kamarck, & Mermelstein, 2000). In this research study, the variable of stress was measured by the PSS. This scale is a brief 10 item scale consisting of likert style questions. The scale asks respondents about their feelings and thoughts experienced within the last month. Response options range from *never* to *very often* in regard to how often respondents felt or thought a certain way in the last month. The scale has four items that need to be reversed scored and the scale score is derived from summing the item scores (Cohen et al., 2000). In regard to reliability of the PSS, it has “good internal consistency with an alpha of .78” (Cohen et al., 2000, p.570). The

construct validity of the PSS scale is good and it has been “significantly correlated with the Life Satisfaction Scale” (Cohen et al., p. 570, 2000). It has also been associated with measures of “potential sources of stress as assessed by stress event frequency” (Cohen et al., 2000, p.570).

To measure the variable of types of coping strategies, the Brief COPE scale which is a smaller version of the “COPE inventory” (p. 92) was used (Carver, 1997). The Brief COPE scale is a 28 item scale consisting of 14 scales with two items each. The Brief COPE measures a variety of different coping strategies and they are measured by responses to likert style questions (Carver, 1997). Response options in regards to type of coping strategy used range from *I haven't been doing this at all* to *I've been doing this a lot* (Carver, 1997). The Brief COPE was created to measure types of coping strategies and it is not to be totaled to one score, but rather each type of coping strategy measured has two items making up an individual scale (Carver, 1997). The reliability of the Brief COPE subscales are regarded as adequate with most of the subscales being above .60 (Carver, 1997).

The KMS scale was used to measure the variable of marital satisfaction in the research study. The KMS scale was developed for the purpose of measuring “marital satisfaction” (para. 2) and was designed by Schumm, Paff-Bergen, Hatch, Obiorah, Copeland, Meens, and Bugaighis (Schumm et al., 1986, 2000). The scale consists of three likert scale questions asking participants to rate how satisfied they are with different components of their marital relationship (Schumm et al., 2000). The response options range from being *extremely dissatisfied* to *extremely satisfied*. The KMS scale scores range from three to 21, and the higher score represents greater marital satisfaction

(Schumm et al., 2000). The internal consistency of the KMS scale is very good with an alpha of .93. The KMS scale “has excellent concurrent validity, significantly correlating with the Dyadic Adjustment Scale and the Quality of Marriage Index” (Schumm et al., 2000, p.127).

Another portion of the survey includes questions regarding the demographics of the participants. Questions asked participants to indicate their gender, number of deployments experienced as a married couple, the current deployment status of their spouse, whether or not they have children, and indication of military branch. These questions were intended to provide data for questions about how these variables are associated with stress, coping, and marital satisfaction.

Data was collected through self-administered online surveys. The study used the Qualtrics software program and collected the data from the survey once participants filled out the survey. To distribute the surveys, a Navy service member emailed an invitation to Navy service members who then emailed the survey link to their spouses, to complete the survey along with a link to the survey. Once participants completed the survey the data was automatically entered into the online Qualtrics software program. The survey was 46 items long and should have taken approximately 10-15 minutes for respondents to complete. There was a one week waiting period from the time the surveys were first distributed to when the surveys were emailed out again requesting that if they have not participated yet, there was still time to complete the survey. Participants were offered no incentives to participate in the study.

### **Data Analysis**

This study retrieved data from the scales and demographical information on the surveys and downloaded it into the SPSS program. Descriptive statistics were completed for all the variables. T-tests, ANOVAs, and regressions were intended to be used to determine the relationships between perceived stress, specific types of coping strategies, marital satisfaction and to answer the questions identified above.

The first variable was gender. Gender was operationalized categorically with the option of choosing either male or female. The next variable was existence of children and was operationalized categorically and asked if the spouse had any children and gave the option of choosing yes or no. The next variable was the number of deployments that the marital couple had experienced together and this was operationalized as a continuous variable giving them a space to enter the number. The next variable was the stage of deployment cycle that they were currently in and it was operationalized categorically and the question gave the option of choosing pre-deployment, deployment, post-deployment, and non-deployment. The last variable asked what branch of the military the spouse was currently in and it is operationalized categorically giving the option of filling in the space with what military branch they were in. Descriptive statistics were run on all of these variables.

The variables of perceived stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction are measured by scales. Perceived stress was measured by a scale score from the Perceived Stress Scale with a high scale score indicating higher perceived stress and a lower score indicating lower perceived stress (Cohen et al., 2000). Coping strategies were measured by 14 different scale scores on the Brief Cope measure. For each scale score the range was 2 to 8, with a score of 2 indicating no use of the coping strategy and a score of 8

indicating that coping strategy is used a lot. There were scale scores on the Brief Cope measure for each of the following types of coping strategies: *self distraction, active coping, denial, substance use, use of emotional support, use of instrumental support, behavioral disengagement, venting, positive reframing, planning, humor, acceptance, religion, and self blame* (Carver, 1997). Lastly, marital satisfaction was measured by a scale score from the Kansas Marital Satisfaction scale. The scale scores range from 3-21. The score of 3 indicated *extreme dissatisfaction* with the marriage and the score of 21 indicated *extreme satisfaction* with the marriage (Schumm et al., 2000).

**Descriptive Statistics.** Descriptive statistics were run for each variable used in the survey. The demographic questions were gender, presence of children, number of deployments experienced as a married couple, current stage of deployment cycle, and branch of military. Descriptive statistics were also run on the three scale scores.

**Gender.** To calculate descriptive statistics on gender, a frequency distribution was completed. This frequency distribution showed the number of participants who were male and the number of participants who were female.

**Children.** To calculate descriptive statistics on the amount of spouses who had children, a frequency distribution was completed. This frequency distribution showed the amount of spouses who indicated that they had children, and the amount of spouses who indicated that they did not have children.

**Number of deployments.** To calculate descriptive statistics on the number of deployments that spouses had experienced together as a married couple, measures of central tendency were completed. The mean will identified the average number of

deployments that spouses had experienced together as a married couple. The standard deviation was also reported to show the range of deployments for the sample.

***Deployment stage.*** To calculate descriptive statistics on the deployment stage of the military service member, a frequency distribution and measures of central tendency was completed. The frequency distribution indicated how many participants were in the pre-deployment, deployment, post-deployment, and non-deployment stages. The measure of central tendency that was used was the mode. The mode indicated the most common stage of deployment that the participants were in at the time of the survey.

***Military branch.*** To calculate descriptive statistics on the branch of the military that the military spouse was in, a frequency distribution was completed. The frequency distribution identified how many spouses indicated that their military service member spouse was in each branch of the military.

***Perceived stress.*** To calculate the descriptive statistics on the level of perceived stress variable measures of central tendency were run. The measures of central tendencies that were run include the mode, median, and mean. The measures of central tendency were displayed in a bar chart.

***Coping strategies.*** To calculate the descriptive statistics for the different types of coping strategies, measures of central tendency were run. The measures of central tendency were completed for each of the 14 scale scores found on the Brief COPE measure. Measures of central tendency included the mean and it was displayed in a table.

***Marital satisfaction.*** To calculate the descriptive statistics for the variable level of marital satisfaction measures of central tendency including mean, median, and mode were run. These measures of central tendency were displayed on a bar chart.

**Research Questions.** Inferential statistics were proposed to be calculated for each research question to determine if the research hypotheses could be accepted.

**Research question one.** The first research question was as follows: do males and females differ in their levels of perceived stress, coping strategies, and levels of marital satisfaction? The research hypotheses were as follows:

- Female spouses will have higher perceived stress levels than male spouses.
- Males and females will differ in their utilization of coping strategies.
- Female spouses will indicate lower levels of marital satisfaction than male spouses.

To determine if there was a difference between males and females in regards to the variables of perceived stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction, a two sample T-test was proposed to be completed for each of the three variables level of perceived stress, coping strategies, and level of marital satisfaction.

**Research question two.** The second research question was as follows: do spouses of military service members with children and without children differ in perceived stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction? The research hypotheses for this question were as follows:

- Spouses who have children will have higher perceived stress than those without children.
- Spouses who have children will utilize different coping strategies than those without children.



- Spouses who have children will differ in their marital satisfaction when compared to those who do not have children.

To determine if there was a difference between spouses with and without children in regards to the variables of perceived stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction, a two sample t-test was proposed to be completed for each of the three variables, level of perceived stress, coping strategies, and level of marital satisfaction.

***Research question three.*** The third research question was as follows: is there a relationship between number of deployments experienced as a married couple and the variables of perceived stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction in spouses of military service members? The general research hypothesis for this question was that there would be a relationship between number of deployments and perceived stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction. More specific hypotheses included the following:

- As the number of military deployments increase the level of perceived stress will increase.
- As the number of military deployments increase, the more often the coping strategies of self distraction, active coping, and use of emotional support will increase.
- As the number of military deployments increases the level of marital satisfaction will decrease.

To determine if there was a relationship between the number of deployments and level of perceived stress, coping strategies, and level of marital satisfaction a correlation

statistical analysis was proposed to be completed for each of the three variables. Correlation data was proposed to be displayed in a scatter plot for each variable indicating the relationship between number of deployments and level of perceived stress, coping strategies, and level of marital satisfaction.

***Research question four.*** The fourth research question was as follows: does deployment status predict perceived stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction in spouses of military service members? The research hypothesis for this question was that deployment status would predict perceived stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction. More specific hypotheses were as follows:

- Spouses who are in a non-deployment phase will indicate low perceived stress, high marital satisfaction, and will indicate the use of different coping strategies than those in the other stages of deployment.
- Spouses who are in the pre-deployment phase will indicate high perceived stress, high marital satisfaction, and will indicate the use of different coping strategies than those in the other stages of deployment.
- Spouses who are in the deployment phase will indicate high levels of perceived stress, low marital satisfaction, and will indicate the use of different coping strategies than those in the other stages of deployment.
- Spouses who are in the post-deployment phase will indicate high levels of perceived stress, low marital satisfaction, and will indicate the use of different coping strategies than those in the other stages of deployment.

To determine if deployment status is a predictor of levels of perceived stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction a multiple-regression analysis was proposed to be completed. For each deployment stage, a multiple-regression analysis was proposed to be completed to determine the effects that each stage has on the three variables of perceived stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction. An ANOVA statistical analysis was proposed to be completed as well to determine the variance between the four deployment cycles of non-deployment, pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment, and the variables of level of perceived stress, coping strategies, and level of marital satisfaction.

***Research question five.*** The fifth research question was as follows: do spouses with service members in different branches of the military differ in their perceived stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction? The general research hypothesis was as follows: There will be a difference between spouses of military service members in different branches and their level of perceived stress, coping strategies, and level of marital satisfaction. The specific hypotheses were as follows:

- Spouses of military service members in different branches will differ in their levels of perceived stress.
- Spouses of military service members in different branches will differ in their use of coping strategies.
- Spouses of military service members in different branches will differ in their levels of marital satisfaction.

To test the hypotheses and determine if there was a difference between Navy and Air Force Reserve service members, a t-test was proposed to be completed.

**Research question six.** The sixth research question was as follows: does perceived stress and coping strategies predict level of marital satisfaction in spouses of military service members? This question asked whether perceived stress and coping strategies predict level of marital satisfaction. The general research hypothesis is that level of perceived stress, and types of coping strategies will predict level of marital satisfaction in spouses of military service members. Specific hypotheses were as follows:

- Spouses with high levels of perceived stress that use the coping strategies of religion, self distraction, active coping, and use of emotional support will have high marital satisfaction.
- Spouses with high levels of perceived stress that use the coping strategies of behavioral disengagement, denial, and substance use will have low levels of marital satisfaction.

To determine the predictors of marital satisfaction, a stepwise regression analysis was proposed to be completed. Results from the regression analysis will show the predictive values of perceived stress and coping on marital satisfaction.

## **Results**

To recruit participants, participants in the Navy were sent a recruitment message with the survey link on February 6, 2012 and again on February 16, 2012. Other participants viewed the recruitment message and survey link on an Army Reserve veteran's face book status from February 6, 2012 to February 24, 2012. A total of 15 subjects began the survey. Five of those subjects began the survey but did not complete

the survey with one not agreeing to the informed consent, one completed the survey but reported that their spouse was not in the military, and three did not finish the survey.

A total of 10 ( $N= 10$ ) subjects participated in this study. As a result of the small sample size, only descriptive statistics were completed and no inferential statistics are included in data analysis. The following is an overview of the responses on each variable of those ten respondents.

### **Demographics**

**Gender and Children.** The participants in this study were all civilian spouses of military service members. A total of seven (70%) participants were female and three (30%) participants were male. Of the 10 respondents, a total of seven (70%) participants reported that they had children and three (30%) participants reported that they did not have children.

**Number of Deployments.** This study was interested in the number of deployments the families experienced and whether or not that affected the variables of stress, coping, and marital satisfaction. However, this study was unable to determine if the number of deployments impacts these variables. The mean number of deployments that the participants had experienced together as a married couple is 1.10 ( $SD= .568$ ). Of the 10 participants in the study, the minimum reported deployments experienced as a married couple was zero and the maximum was two. Although, a few participants indicated that they experienced 0-1 deployments as a married couple, two indicated that they have experienced many other long separations due to military life.

**Deployment Status.** This study inquired about deployment status to determine if there was any impact of deployment status on the variables of stress, coping, and marital

satisfaction. However, the relationship between deployment status and the other variables were not able to be determined due to the small amount of participants. The response options for deployment status were as follows: non-deployment status, pre-deployment status, deployed, and post-deployment. Of the total participants, nine (90%) were currently in non-deployment status, and one (10%) were in post-deployment status.

**Military Branch.** This study was interested in military branch to determine if there was any difference among spouses of military service members in different branches and their stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction. This study was unable to determine if there was a relationship between military branch and other variables due to the low level of participants.

Of the total participants in the study, four (40%) of spouses were in the Navy, three (30%) were in the Army National Guard, two (20%) were in the Army Reserve, and one (10%) was in the Army.

### **Perceived Stress**

Perceived stress was a variable that this study was interested in, to determine if stress level in spouses of military service members was related to types of coping strategies selected, marital satisfaction, and demographics. This study was unable to determine any relationships between perceived stress level and other variables due to the low participant rate.

The total number of scale scores included in the data analysis for Perceived Stress is seven ( $N=7$ ). The perceived stress scale score can range from zero to 40, with zero indicating a low level of perceived stress and 40 indicating a high amount of

perceived stress. The minimum score of participating subjects is 10 and the maximum is 26. The mean perceived stress scale score is 16.85 ( $SD= 5.843$ ).

### **Brief COPE**

Coping strategies were variables that this study was interested in to determine if different types of coping strategies impacted other variables in spouses of military service members including stress level, marital satisfaction and other variables. This study was unable to determine if there was a relationship between coping techniques and other variables due to the low amount of participants. The Brief COPE scale was used to measure the use of various types of coping strategies and it is made up of 14 scale scores with two items per scale score. Each scale score has a possible range from two to eight, with a two indicating that the participant does not use the coping strategy at all, and an eight indicating the participant uses the coping strategy a lot.

Table 1 illustrates that the coping strategies that were utilized more by civilian spouses include active coping, positive reframing, planning, and acceptance. Other types of coping strategies were used slightly less by civilian spouses in this study which include self-distraction, use of emotional and instrumental support, venting, self-blame, and humor. The coping strategies that civilian spouses used the least were denial, substance use, behavioral disengagement, and religion.

Table 1

*Mean Coping Strategies Scores of Spouses of Military Service Members*

Coping Type	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Self-Distraction	3	6	4.1	.875
Active Coping	4	8	5.6	1.57
Denial	2	5	2.5	.971
Substance Use	2	4	2.2	.63
Emotional Support	2	8	4.2	1.87
Instrumental Support	2	7	4.1	1.72
Behavioral Disengagement	2	5	3.0	1.15
Venting	2	6	4.1	1.37
Positive Reframing	3	8	5.7	1.76
Planning	3	8	5	1.76
Humor	2	6	4.2	1.93
Acceptance	3	8	5.6	1.57
Religion	2	6	3.9	1.44
Self-Blame	3	7	4.2	1.22

**Marital Satisfaction**

This study was interested in the marital satisfaction of spouses of military service members and if marital satisfaction was impacted by stress, coping strategies, and other



variables. A relationship between marital satisfaction and other variables in this study were not able to be determined due to the low amount of participants in this study.

The total number of scale scores included in the data analysis for the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale score is 10 ( $N=10$ ). The marital satisfaction scale score can range from three to 21, with three indicating a low level of marital satisfaction and 21 indicating a high level of marital satisfaction. The participant's minimum score on marital satisfaction was nine and the maximum is 21. The mean marital satisfaction was 16.7 ( $SD= 3.86$ ).

The intent of this study was to examine the relationships between perceived stress, coping strategies, marital satisfaction, and other variables. Unfortunately, the low number of participants did not allow for inferential statistical analyses to be completed and therefore the relationships between variables were not able to be determined. However, descriptive statistical analyses were completed which provided some comparisons between this study and previous research with spouses of military service members.

### **Discussion**

This research study sought to further our understanding of civilian spouses' experiences by examining the relationship between perceived stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction in spouses of military service members. The interest in the relationship between these variables and particularly in spouses of service members is derived from the literature that emphasizes many of these variables individually but not in relation to each other. Furthermore, the literature has focused primarily on service members; therefore, this study focused on the experiences of civilian spouses.

The literature speaks to the need for research to focus on spouses of military service members. For example, the literature indicates that spouses of military service members face experiences of “stress or emotional problems” (p. 1053) (Eaton et al., 2008). Spouses of service members use a variety of techniques to cope with the stress of the military lifestyle, such as deployments. A few coping strategies used by spouses of service members include methods of self care, spiritual commitment, distraction, and support from relatives, family, and social relationships (Wheeler & Stone, 2010; Lapp et al., 2010; Moelker & Kloet, 2006). Identifying stress levels and coping strategies is important because the military lifestyle can put a strain on the marriage relationship; for example, Gomulka (2010) indicates that marital difficulties in military couples are underestimated.

The intent of this study was to examine the relationship between perceived stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction in spouses of military service members. However, due to the low response rate, the relationship between these variables was not evaluated. Therefore, conclusions about hypotheses made regarding the relationships between these variables cannot be examined. Due to the inability to derive inferential data from the results, descriptive data was gathered for each variable and question in the study.

The gender distribution in this study was 70 percent female spouses and 30 percent male spouses. The distribution of 30 percent male civilian spouses further emphasizes the need for more research into males as the civilian spouse; as a significant portion of the research has emphasized only female civilian spouses. (Dimiceli et al., 2010; Moelker & Kloet, 2006; Wheeler & Stone, 2010). It is interesting that this study

had so many male civilian spouses. As of 2007, females made up 16 percent of the military (APA Presidential Task Force on Military Deployment Services for Youth, Families, and Service Members, 2007). Although it is not known if the 16 percent are married, the findings of this present study may indicate that the number of females has only increased since 2007, and if they are married, there are more male civilian spouses on the home front. Future research endeavors, could focus on male civilian spouses and compare their experiences to that of female civilian spouses.

Seventy percent of couples reported that they do have children and 30 percent of couples reported that they do not have children. Further inquiry is needed as research indicates that the civilian spouse faces significant difficulties when they are the only parent in the home during deployments (Wheeler & Stone, 2010). The relationship between the presence of children in the family and other variables such as level of perceived stress would be an area for further research since this study was not able to determine this. Future research should determine if deployment status and presence of children, affects stress levels and marital satisfaction in spouses of military service members.

In this study, the average number of deployments experienced as a married couple was 1.10. The greatest number of deployments experienced as a married couple was two. The number of deployment results in Padden et al.'s (2011a) study fared similarly, with the average number of previous deployments experienced being "2.27" (p. 256). The number of deployments experienced as a couple in this study could be related to multiple variables such as length of marriage, age of spouses, and military branch. These variables were not able to be controlled for in this study therefore, future research could

attempt to control for these variables to determine what variables may relate to higher or lower amounts of deployments. Determining relationships between number of deployments and other variables is helpful because research suggests that civilian spouses are more resilient with increasing numbers of deployments but may still suffer from burnout (Morse, 2006).

The participants in this study were only in the category of non-deployment status (90%) and post-deployment status (10%). In this study, non-deployment status is described as the service member having no impending deployment and it has been more than three months since the return of the service member. Post-deployment status is described as being the time following the return of the service member and the reintegration into the family. The results of this study indicating a majority being in non-deployment status and the rest in post-deployment status could be due to the timing of the survey distribution. The surveys were distributed in February, which could have been during a time when the military service members were stationed at home. The researcher did not have knowledge of the possibility of deployments in the sample.

The results of deployment status in this study may also be due to the types of military branches represented. Some branches of the military deploy more often than others and this study included Navy (40%), Army National Guard (30%), Army Reserve (20%), and Army (10%). Deployment status has differing affects on the spouse of the military service member and their family depending on what stage of deployment the family is experiencing (Macdermid, 2006; Morse, 2006). According to research, the spouses in this study who are in the non-deployment and post-deployment stage will most

likely be experiencing role adjustment, family change, and a process of allowing the service member to assimilate back into the family (Macdermid, 2006; Morse, 2006).

The spouses in this study had a relatively low perceived stress level with a mean of 16.85. The stress levels in this study may indicate lower perceived stress as a result of the non-deployment status of the service members. This is consistent with Eastman et al.'s (1990) study, which suggests that civilian spouses have lower stress levels when their spouse is not deployed but is stationed to work on "shore duty" (p. 123). The average perceived stress in this study was similar to the average ( $M=17.54$ ) perceived stress level in Padden et al.'s (2011b) study with wives of currently deployed active duty service members. The similarity of stress levels between spouses of currently deployed and non-deployed service members may suggest that deployment status does not affect perceived stress level. However, Burton et al. (2009) found that there was a statistically significant difference between perceived stress scores in spouses of deployed and non-deployed service members; with higher perceived stress in spouses of the deployed and lower perceived stress in spouses of the non-deployed. Since this current study was unable to provide clarity on this subject, future research should seek to determine if deployment status impacts civilian spouse perceived stress level. Another interesting avenue for future research is to determine if male and female civilian spouses differ in their perceived stress levels during different stages of deployment.

The most common coping strategies used by civilian spouses in this study include active coping, positive reframing, planning, and acceptance. The second most common coping strategies used by civilian spouses in this study include self-distraction, use of emotional and instrumental support, venting, self-blame, and humor. The coping

strategies that civilian spouses used the least were denial, substance use, behavioral disengagement, and religion. Interestingly, there are similarities that arise between this study and previous research regarding civilian spouse coping strategies. The most frequently used coping strategies in this study some of which include active coping, planning, and acceptance were also found to be the most frequently used in Dimiceli et al.'s (2010) study of wives of currently deployed Army service members. The second most frequently used coping strategies in this study that present similar to the Dimiceli et al. (2010) study include self-distraction, self-blame, venting, and humor. These similarities are interesting because in this study the civilian spouses were in non-deployment status and in Dimiceli et al.'s (2010) study the civilian spouses were in deployed status, however, spouses from both studies used the same type of coping strategies. The aforementioned similarities possibly suggest that coping strategies remain the same throughout different deployment stages. Results in this study were not able to indicate how coping strategies impact stress level, or marital satisfaction; or how deployment status may impact coping strategies. Therefore, future research endeavors could look at the impact that civilian spouse utilization of coping strategies has on these variables.

Overall, the spouses in this study reported a high level of marital satisfaction with an average of 16.7. This is a much higher average than the average marital satisfaction found in wives of active duty army service members which was "5.59" (p. 283) (Allen et al., 2010). The reason for the high level of marital satisfaction in this sample of spouses of military service members was unable to be determined. It could be that these particular spouses of military service members are coincidentally, highly satisfied with

their marriages. Previous research, has related coping strategies such as communication, to marital satisfaction in civilian spouses (Joseph & Affifi, 2010). However, overall, studies have not related variables specifically to marital satisfaction. This study hoped to bring clarity to the relationship between marital satisfaction and other variables of military life such as perceived stress, deployments, and coping strategies. Unfortunately, the relationship was unable to be determined in this study, due to small sample size.

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This research study has a few strengths and limitations that are important to identify and are noted in this section. In regards to strengths, the research method is quantitative in nature and uses an online survey method to collect data. The online format of the survey allows for easy access and quick distribution and participation in the research study. Another strength of this research study is the anonymity of the participants. The anonymous nature of the surveys may allow the participants to feel more comfortable being honest in answering questions (Monette, Sullivan, & DeJong, 2008). In light of the changing demographics of the military which includes more female service members, another strength of this research study is the openness of the sample to male or female civilian spouses. Lastly, the lack of opinion from the researcher is a strength because the participant is not influenced by interpersonal aspects when taking an anonymous survey (Monette et al., 2008).

In addition to the strengths of this study, there are some significant limitations that prevent the results of this study to be generalized to the larger population of civilian spouses. The greatest limitation to this study is the small response rate. The small response rate may be due to the distribution method which is also considered a limitation

of this study. The surveys for spouses of Navy service members were first sent to the service member and then they had the choice to forward the survey to their civilian spouse. Military service members may have been reluctant to send the survey to their civilian spouse due to the questions regarding marital satisfaction. This method of indirect distribution of surveys may have hindered the chance for more spouses of service members to participate in the study. Another reason that may have affected the low response rate was the fact that military service members and their families already have a lot to deal with when it comes to daily life and completing a survey may have not been top priority.

It is not known whether or not the survey link was distributed to any military service members who were currently deployed. It is possible that if the surveys were sent to currently deployed military service members, the service member may be too busy to focus on an email and furthermore, they may not want to forward a marital satisfaction survey to their civilian spouse at home.

Another limitation impacted by the small sample size is the low amount of participants from different military branches. Some branches of the military may be highly combat focused and this may instigate different struggles in the military family. Relationships between military branch and stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction were not able to be determined due to small sample size.

The anonymity of the survey is another limitation because it does not allow the researcher total confidence that the person who completed the survey is the person who is supposed to be completing it (Monette et al., 2008). The quantitative survey design of



this research study is limiting because it does not allow for the personal viewpoints of military spouses as a qualitative research design would have allowed for.

A limitation that may have impacted the results of this study was a mistake in the wording of the response options on the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale. The response options for the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale on the survey were written as: *very dissatisfied, dissatisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, mixed, somewhat dissatisfied, satisfied, and very satisfied* (Schumm et al., 2000). The response options from the actual Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale are as follows: extremely dissatisfied, very dissatisfied, somewhat dissatisfied, mixed, somewhat satisfied, very satisfied, and extremely satisfied. This slight change in wording mistakenly put in by the researcher may have changed the validity of the results.

Another important limitation to mention is the deployment cycle is sometimes ongoing for military families and narrowing down exactly where they are in the deployment cycle to the options of pre-deployment, deployment, post-deployment, non-deployment is limiting the details of the participants' individual experiences of deployment.

Another limitation is that this study only focused on married couples in the military. However, many couples in the military may not be married and this study was not able to include those dynamics. Furthermore, this study only focused on civilian spouses and not necessarily the family as a whole system. This study was not able to focus on each member of military family's experience and determine needs in those areas.

**Implications for Social Work Practice**

The findings of this study have indicated that these spouses of military service members have high marital satisfaction, relatively low perceived stress, and most often utilize positive type coping strategies. This study was unable to determine relationships between these variables as well as determining if number of deployments and deployment status are predictive variables. The findings in this study are not able to be generalized to the greater population of military families. Therefore, it will be important to do further research, review previous research, and use the results when working with military families.

Although this study is not generalizable to the overall military population, the findings from this study are useful for interventions with military families in social work practice. Social workers have been and will be increasingly working with military service members and their families in the coming years as troops are coming back from the war. This study and previous research indicates that the same type of coping strategies may be used regardless of deployment status. However, it is possible that utilizing different types of coping strategies than the ones often used by civilian spouses may be useful for overall health and well being. Therefore, social workers can help spouses of service members practice new coping strategies that fit into their specific circumstances.

The results of this study showed low perceived stress levels in civilian spouses during the non-deployment status. However, this may not always be the case when the service member is deployed. The literature indicates that military life is very stressful and many spouses find that deployments are the most stressful part of military life

(Dimiceli et al., 2010). Social workers who work clinically with military families will need to assess for the levels of stress that civilian spouses are experiencing and work with them to utilize positive coping strategies to cope with stress and marital issues.

There is not enough solid research indicating what affects marital satisfaction in spouses of service members. There is a great need to determine how marital satisfaction relates to other aspects of military life. Civilian spouses are a source of support for their service members and they help the service member prepare for deployments and duties by essentially “holding down the fort” at home. Future research is necessary to determine what makes a military marriage successful and how it can impact children in military families. Furthermore, due to the lack of extensive research into military life, it is easy to rest on assumptions about the military community and the problems that they may struggle with. Therefore, it is imperative that social workers who work with the military community continue to be aware that every family is different and unique.

Lastly, this research study can be replicated within the military system to determine the relationships that this study could not. Those results can be used to assess the needs of the military community and be used to initiate interventions that address those needs. Furthermore, there is a need for social workers to work in the military and serve those on the front lines as well as at home.

Due to the high number of troops and soldiers in the war, the internal supports that the military provides to their community may be stretched. Therefore, social workers will have opportunities to advocate for policies that extend support to military families. In addition, social workers who work clinically with military service members, civilian spouses, and military families have a unique opportunity to hear case by case

struggles. Social workers who work with military families can gather qualitative data that will shed more detailed light on the individual family struggles, which is something that quantitative data does not capture as well. In the next few years, social workers will need to extend efforts to understand military culture and the needs that arise within this distinct system.

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*Appendix A. Consent Form***UNIVERSITY OF ST. THOMAS/ST. CATHERINE'S UNIVERSITY****RESEARCH INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM****Stress, Coping Strategies, and Marital Satisfaction in Spouses of Military Service Members****Introduction:**

You are invited to participate in a research study that investigates the relationships between perceived stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction in spouses of military service members. You were selected as a potential participant in this research study because you are an individual who is a civilian spouse of someone in the military and you are 18 or older. Please read this form before you decide whether to participate in this study.

This study is being conducted by Charlene Haapala, a Master of Social Work graduate student at the School of Social Work, St. Catherine/St. Thomas University and is supervised by Dr. Sarah Ferguson a professor in the Social Work Program at St. Catherine/St. Thomas University

**Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to identify the impact that perceived stress, use of coping strategies, and military life has on the marital satisfaction in spouses of military service members. With an increase in repeated deployments and length of deployments, it is important to identify the levels of stress that spouses of military service member's experience, and what coping strategies they utilize. This research will provide professionals with a greater understanding of the successes and potential challenges faced by spouses of military service members. Furthermore this will help professionals and the military identify areas of greatest need when working with and assisting military families. Approximately (300) people will have the opportunity to participate in this research study.

**Procedures:**

If you decide to participate, you will be asked to carefully read through this informed consent. Then you will be asked to read through the directions included in the survey and read each question carefully. Please answer each question to the best of your ability. The responses that you provide in this survey will be used to determine relationships between stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction. This survey will take approximately 10-20 minutes to complete.

**Risks and Benefits:**

The study has some risks involved. The questions on the survey are likely to bring up some emotions that may be difficult. If you experience significant emotional distress and are in need of support, here is a crisis line number that you may contact:

\*Military OneSource: 1-800-342-9647 to contact a consultant for immediate 24/7 help.

There are no direct benefits to you for participating in this research.

**Confidentiality:**

The surveys are completely anonymous and the researcher will not know any contact/or identifiable information about the participants. In any written reports or publications, no one will be identified or identifiable and only group data will be presented.

I will keep the research results in a password protected personal computer and only my advisor and I will have access to the records while I work on this project. I will finish analyzing the data by May 9, 2012.

I will then destroy all original survey reports.

**Voluntary nature of the study:**

Participation in this research study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with the Navy Operational Support Center, or St. Catherine University in any way. If you decide to participate, you are free to stop at any time without affecting these relationships, and no further data will be collected. You may also refuse to answer any question on the survey.

**Contacts and questions:**

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me, at \_\_\_\_\_. You may ask questions now, or if you have any additional questions later, the faculty advisor, Sarah Ferguson, will be happy to answer them. If you have other questions or concerns regarding the study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you may also contact \_\_\_\_\_

You may keep a copy of this form for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

You are making a decision whether or not to participate. Your participation in this online survey indicates your consent and that you have read this information and your questions or concerns have been answered.

*Appendix B. Navy Recruitment Letter*

Greetings,

IF YOU ARE A CURRENT NAVY SERVICE MEMBER WHO IS MARRIED TO A CIVILIAN SPOUSE, PLEASE FORWARD THIS MESSAGE WITH THE SURVEY LINK TO YOUR SPOUSE.

**IF YOU ARE A CURRENT CIVILIAN SPOUSE OF A MILITARY SERVICE MEMBER:** You are invited to take a survey that inquires about the relationships between stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction in spouses of military service members. You were selected as a potential participant to take the survey because you are an individual who is over the age of 18 and are married to a spouse who is in the military. All surveys are completely anonymous and your email address will not be attached to the survey you take and you will not be identified in any way to anyone. If you would like to take the survey please click on the link below. This link will take you to the informed consent and online survey. Please read through the informed consent form before proceeding to take the survey.

**Survey link:**

Thank you for your participation!

Sincerely,

Charlene Haapala  
MSW Student in the School of Social Work, St. Catherine University

*Appendix C. Recruitment Letter for Military Service Members – Face book Method*

Greetings,

IF YOU ARE A CURRENT MILITARY SERVICE MEMBER WHO IS MARRIED TO A CIVILIAN SPOUSE, PLEASE FORWARD THIS MESSAGE WITH THE SURVEY LINK TO YOUR SPOUSE.

**IF YOU ARE A CIVILIAN SPOUSE OF A MILITARY SERVICE MEMBER:**

You are invited to take a survey that inquires about the relationships between stress, coping strategies, and marital satisfaction in spouses of military service members. You were selected as a potential participant to take the survey because you are an individual who is over the age of 18 and are married to a spouse who is in the military.

All surveys are completely anonymous and your email address will not be attached to the survey you take and you will not be identified in any way to anyone.

If you would like to take the survey please click on the survey link below. This link will take you to the informed consent and online survey. Please read through the informed consent form before proceeding to take the survey.

**Survey link:**

Thank you for your participation!

Sincerely,

Charlene Haapala

MSW Student in the School of Social Work, St. Catherine University