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Exploring the Motivational Factors that Empower Military Spouses to Pursue Degrees in Higher Education



Exploring the Motivational Factors that Empower Military Spouses to Pursue Degrees in Higher Education

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Abstract

This study aimed to explore the factors that motivate and empower military spouses to persist in pursuing degrees in higher education. The following research question guided this study. What do military spouses perceive as the factors that motivate and empower them to persist in earning college degrees? Fifteen military spouses participated in this study. The military spouses who participated in the study shared their experiences on motivating factors that empowered them to continue earning a college degree. The theory of Cultural Capital was used as the theoretical framework to guide the concept that the military environment is a culture within a culture and that they bring this knowledge and experience into the classroom.

Key terms: Military, spouse, higher education, degree, cultural capital

Introduction

The Theory of Cultural Capital guided this study. Cultural Capital is a term developed and popularized by the late-twentieth-century French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in 1986 (Lareau & Weininger, 2003). Bourdieu (1986) defined cultural capital as the accumulation of knowledge, behaviors, and skills that individuals can tap into to demonstrate their cultural competence and, thus, their social status or standing in society. The purpose of using this theory was to bring awareness of the military culture to those outside and to demonstrate how this culture is a culture within a culture. The Theory of Cultural Capital provided the researcher with the best understanding of the behaviors which military spouses bring to the educational arena, such as prior knowledge and skills acquired from their experiences living within the military environment. The theory also brings awareness of the cultural competence of this population.

Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) pioneered the concept of cultural capital and described cultural capital as a form of symbolic power conveyed through education and transformed into economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Swartz, 1997). Bourdieu (1986) explained how cultural

capital exists in three forms: (a) *embodied* - incorporated in a person's linguistic competence and cultural affinities; (b) the *material* form of cultural capital, that is, the possession of cultural goods, such as books, paintings, or works of art; and (c) *institutionalized*, such as educational qualifications (Kosutic, 2017). Based on their responses, some of the following recurring themes emerged for those factors that empowered them to persist in earning a college degree included: (a) financial and educational benefits from the military, (b) supportive university staff during challenges, (c) self-efficacy and self-confidence, (d) overcoming barriers and challenges in the classroom, (g) envisioning future educational goals and aspirations, and (h) ability to balance work and family life.

Military students tend to bring a different level of cultural awareness to the academic realm. They are culturally diverse, often bilingual, and have a high sense of global awareness due to their living experiences, unlike many students enrolled in classes. However, military spouses face many challenges related to college and university higher education programs (Bonura & Lovald, 2015). According to Gleiman and Swearingen (2012), little research has been done to explore the educational needs and barriers of military spouses as a separate student population, such as the Importance of cultural capital within the military population. Cultural capital within the academic realm is the skills, knowledge, norms, and values that can be used to advance education and life (Thompson, 2016). Considering these assets, students who develop these skills and knowledge have an advantage when engaging in college and higher education programs. Therefore, understanding the cultural capital of the military population is vital in mitigating military spouses' challenges in college and education programs.

Hall's (2010) research strengthened the concept of the Importance of understanding military culture in teaching military-connected students and that understanding the characteristics of the military culture requires an understanding that the military mission of the sponsor takes precedence. Sponsors receive military orders directing them where and when to move for the following purpose (Hall, 2010). Military life has many challenges and demands, such as military deployments that can last anywhere from a few days to several months or a year. Unless educational leaders understand their language, their structure, and their commitment to the mission, those leaders will not be able to reference and offer sufficient care to their families (Hall, 2010). Professional educators must be passionate about helping their military students

matriculate through higher education programs and transition effectively into society after their military careers.

Rouse (2011) suggested that the purpose of developing cultural competencies for a diverse student population requires educational professionals to get the cultural knowledge necessary to interact with students of diverse backgrounds in the higher education environment. Today's colleges must have educational professionals knowledgeable about the federal educational benefits of military-connected students. According to Rouse (2011), colleges must develop proactive recruitment techniques that attract and keep military students to create growth in a diverse student environment.

Matchett-Taylor and Ticole (2018) research concluded that (1) the lifestyles of military spouses are primarily based on the needs of the active military family member, (2) many military spouses persevered in attaining a degree despite their transitional lifestyle, and (3) support, affordability, and breaks in schooling influenced their persistence required for degree completion. In addition, Bonura & Lovald (2015) explored the need for academic resources and support services for military spouses during their college education. For instance, university programs include (a) academic counseling services, (b) learning and cultural support services, and (c) individual academic support by the instructor or professor in the classroom (Bonura & Lovald, 2015).

Wang, Nyutu, Tran, and Spears (2015) explored the essential factors that impacted the well-being of 207 female military spouses of active-duty service members' ability to adapt to the military culture. Wang et al. (2015) defined environmental proficiency as an individual's sense of control over their environment, creating positive mental health and decision-making from active creation and advancement. Also noted was the need for family support. Wang et al. (2015) also found that support from family and friends created a sense of community and positively affected the military spouses' well-being.

Gleiman and Swearengen (2012) described personal narratives and experiences of military spouses within higher education and how adult educators can improve their understanding and serve this unique student population. Most importantly, Gleiman and Swearengen (2012) discussed how many teachers have not interacted with people of diverse backgrounds, nor have they learned about people different from themselves. Most importantly,

the military spouse student population can be an overlooked source of capital in the classroom and is often pumped together with all military groups.

Jebo (2005) examined the role of male spouses in the military culture, specifically to examine the influences of gender on the military spouses' support for the active-duty sponsor. Jebo (2005) reported that male spouses, either before military service or military retirees, were often subjected to marginalization and discriminatory treatment from male active-duty service members and female spouses from the military and college institutions. As a result, male spouses face many of the same challenges and barriers as female spouses. However, as the roles of the family continue to change, more men are chosen to take on the role of the military spouse.

Buck (2014) explored the financial resources available to military families. The 2008 GI Bill, known as the Post-9/11 GI Bill, was fully implemented in 2009 and was designed to help reintegrate veterans who served after September 11, 2009, back into society through funding for education and training (Buck, 2014). According to Buck (2014), the influence of the Post 9/11 GI Bill is celebrated for its significant effects on veterans' education levels and participation in civic life. A new provision in the Post 9/11 Bill is the transfer choice option under which the service member can use their benefits or transfer those benefits to their spouse or children (Buck, 2014). Under these provisions, more military spouses can attend college and achieve a higher education degree. This study aimed to explore the factors that motivate and empower military spouses to persist in pursuing degrees in higher education.

Financial Educational Benefits from the Military

Most military spouses agreed that the new educational benefits outlined in the Post-9/11 GI Bill significantly influenced their ability to pursue college degrees. The findings from the study by Buck (2014) support the influence of the Post 9/11 GI Bill on military family members' ability to pursue higher education degrees. Under these provisions, more military spouses can attend college and obtain higher education degrees. The central factor most military spouses mentioned was receiving information about educational benefits and eligibility requirements from personnel on the military base. In addition, many received information about local colleges and universities by visiting their education centers on base, which proved most helpful and instrumental in their decision to pursue their higher education degrees.

Supportive University Staff During Challenges

Another factor was that the institutions of higher education providing services to the military population, according to Bonura & Lovald (2015), should be prepared to understand their distinctive needs and challenges. Many military spouses shared how their university instructors and professors reached out to them during difficult times, such as their spouse's combat deployments and family separations, and how this act positively impacted their ability to complete their college degree programs. Most noticeable were the participants who appreciated having knowledgeable university staff who understood the military culture. In addition, the results indicated that military spouses appreciated having supportive university staff who guided them through the admissions process. This support was a motivating factor in their adaptability to the college environment. The findings from Briscoe (2005) support the findings from this study that individuals generally tended to bond and develop trust with those who were supportive of their needs.

Self-efficacy and Self-confidence

The military spouses expressed the need for self-efficacy and self-confidence to complete a college degree. Several felt that obtaining college degrees increased their confidence, especially as the families transitioned from the military into the civilian sector. Also, many participants were first-generation college students, which gave them a sense of self-confidence and achievement. The findings from the research by Lutz (2014) support this study on the direct relationships between military spouses' resiliency and how these motivation skills empowered their decisions to pursue educational opportunities. Riggs and Riggs' (2011) findings also support the resilience factors that military spouses demonstrate within the military culture, especially during difficult times, such as combat missions, frequent moves, and frequent school changes. Contingent with the findings is that military spouses demonstrate high self-efficacy and self-confidence in college environments.

Overcoming Barriers and Challenges in the Classroom

The participants responded to questions on their perceptions of the factors influencing overcoming barriers and challenges in the classroom. Military spouses described their experiences in the classroom as challenging when balancing their families and the responsibilities of being college students. Many military spouses expressed concern about their

classmates' and instructors' lack of awareness of the military culture. According to the research literature, instructors should be prepared to refer students for support services when needed and apply the appropriate strategies for offering an extension on class assignments and incomplete grades (Bonura & Lovald, 2015). Other factors and barriers included different time zones in their online programs and difficulties responding to class discussion boards and turning in group assignments. Given the transient nature of the military lifestyle and the availability of online education in overseas locations, as well as the capacity to continue education with one institution, many military spouses choose to study at online institutions (Bonura & Lovald, 2015)

Within the military culture, traditionally, males are the active-duty sponsor, and spouses, by tradition, accept the submissive role within the relationship. Jebo (2005) reported that male spouses, either before military service or military retirees, were often subjected to marginalization and discriminatory treatment from male active-duty service members and female spouses from the military and college institutions. Also, male spouses experienced less consideration when balancing their families and the responsibilities of being college students. Jorgenson and Lin's (2010) findings suggested that military spouses experience challenges such as the demands of childcare, frequent moves, job demands, and the absence of degree programs in their new locations. Despite these barriers and challenges, most male and female military spouses displayed high levels of resiliency and perseverance in the classroom.

Establishing Achievable Personal Goals

The results of this study indicated that military spouses were sincere and motivated to accomplish their personal goals. Another motivating factor was the financial reward associated with earning college degrees and the self-satisfaction of achieving their personal and educational goals. The military spouses shared that primarily providing for their families was their essential career goal, and the desire to fulfill their personal goals was a means of investing in themselves. The findings from Hall's (2010) research are like the finding from this study on the Importance of understanding the military culture and encouraging them to accomplish their educational goals.

Envisioning Future Educational Goals and Aspirations

Military spouses openly shared their visions for future educational goals and aspirations. Most pursuing undergraduate degrees plan to continue to an advanced degree program upon

graduation. Several who had master's degrees were satisfied with their degree completion and felt their graduate degree would satisfy their career advancement requirements. Some military spouses wanted to start terminal degree programs to obtain qualifications for senior-level administration positions. Bonura and Lovald (2015) indicated that military students bring unique experiences, insights, challenges, and skills into higher education classrooms. Therefore, educators should be conscious of students from the military culture and provide them with the support needed for educational accomplishments.

Ability to Balance Work and Family Life

Another factor was the military spouses' concept of supporting their sponsor's physical and emotional well-being played a significant role in the stability and well-being of their family. The findings from this study support the findings of Wang et al. (2015). They found that military spouses' social support is often partitioned between family and friends and is considered an essential aspect of military life. Previous research findings indicated that younger military spouses (Johnson et al., 2007) are more at risk for poor coping during deployment than mature wives (Ward et al., 2011). Furthermore, Wang et al. (2015) found that supportive behaviors of others in the community often increased well-being and contributed to how the spouses managed everyday challenges. The military communities, active duty, and retirees understand the demands and complexities of military life and tend to support each other when balancing daily demands.

Several military spouses shared their appreciation for childcare services provided to military spouses attending college. These services are offered in two-hour units in the afternoons and on weekends for those spouses enrolled in higher education programs. They agreed that the hourly childcare services allowed them to complete course assignments. They also noted this as being a significant motivating factor. The findings from Hall (2010) support this study on the Importance of military spouses balancing work and life within the military culture. The findings from Harrell (2000) also found that military culture is a demanding lifestyle requiring a commitment to supporting their families. In addition, the social aspects of the military culture insist on military spouses building bonds with other military spouses (Harrell, 2000).

Methods

This study utilized a qualitative research design with a digital ethnography approach. The study concentrated on military spouses who attended institutions of higher education and pursued

college degrees during the active duty of their military sponsor. Digital ethnography describes the process and methodology of doing ethnographic research in a digital space (Murthy, 2008: 2011). This study used digital ethnography to add additional research to the current literature. This qualitative research approach utilized ethnography is a qualitative research method where the researcher interacts with the participant utilizing digital or social media websites (Creswell, 2016).

This qualitative research approach utilized the social media website LinkedIn to identify a broader geographic range of military spouses enrolled in higher education programs). Murthy (2011) noted that online social networks could be helpful for ethnographers to observe the online social communications of participants and gain insight into cultural-sharing groups for previously unavailable types of ethnographic data. Also, the researcher experienced their culture and understood the culture that this population shared. Ethnographic research can be conducted in any location, including familiar settings.

The military spouses met the criteria of being married to an active-duty military service member stationed in North Carolina, Virginia, and other surrounding military bases. The participants were both male and female. Due to their involvement in the military, sensitive identifying information was not collected. The researcher purposefully selected participants based on their experience as military spouses pursuing degrees in higher education. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research frequently uses purposeful sampling. The researcher selected individuals and sites for the study to understand the research problem and the central phenomenon in the study.

Written approval was obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board. Invitations were emailed to military spouses enrolled in universities that serviced military installations. According to Creswell (2013), the permission granted by participants and the building of rapport will differ depending on the type of qualitative approach used. The researcher emailed the consent letter and a letter of invitation to all participants before the beginning of the research project to ensure they understood the research project and their rights while participating in the study. The participants' identities were kept confidential during and after the study. The participants were purposefully chosen from military spouses stationed in North Carolina, Virginia, and other surrounding military bases, and the social media website LinkedIn, having 6,638

followers. The participants were informed that involvement in the study would be voluntary, and that withdrawal was permitted at any time throughout the data collection process.

The primary data collection tool was interviewing. Purposefully selected participants were utilized for this study based on two factors: (a) being a military spouse and (b) pursuing college degrees. After receiving permission from the university Institutional Review Board, participants were also selected from the LinkedIn website. The invitations were emailed to potential military spouses inviting them to participate in the study. The invitations included a consent letter and the purpose of the study. Individuals who returned the consent letter were contacted through LinkedIn by email post with a follow-up call to schedule a time for a telephone interview. The interview questions were sent to the participants before the scheduled interviews. The participants were provided a written description of the study, the selection criteria, and the estimated timeframe for the interviews. Each interview took one hour. The data were obtained by telephone interviews using the digital transcription service NoNotes Software. The NoNotes transcription service tape-recorded the participants' responses and transcribed the recordings (narrative data) into textual data. All interviews were audio-recorded through the NoNotes Software. In addition, the researcher created and stored an overview of all responses and demographic information as a visual means to locate and identify data.

As stated, the researcher utilized a purposeful sampling approach to recruit participants. According to Creswell (2013), purposeful sampling allows the inquirer to select individuals and sites for a study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon. The following steps of qualitative data analysis guided the data analysis procedure for the stored recordings of the participant's responses. Each audio recording was transposed into textual data. Each transcription of the recordings from the narrative and textual data provided by NoNotes was organized and prepared for analysis.

Results

The participants consisted of 13 females and two male military spouses. The study explored how each military spouse adapted to the educational environment as a student. The participants were members of a cultural group who were stationed at various military bases. Based on the responses to the interview questions, the following recurring themes emerged, (a) financial and educational benefits from the military, (b) supportive university staff during

challenges, (c) self-efficacy and self-confidence, (d) overcoming barriers and challenges in the classroom, (e) establishing achievable personal goals, (f) encouragement from professors influenced motivation and persistence, (g) envisioning future educational goals and aspirations, and (h) ability to balance work and family life.

Financial Educational Benefits from the Military

Most military spouses agreed that the new educational benefits outlined in the Post-9/11 GI Bill significantly influenced their ability to pursue college degrees. Primarily, the educational benefits were only for the members or veterans of the armed force transitioning out of the military. Still, due to the Montgomery GI Bill, family members and dependents are eligible for VA benefits (United States Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016). The military spouses expressed appreciation for benefits and educational opportunities, such as childcare services, federal grants, loan information, and scholarships that defrayed the cost of attending higher education institutions. The findings from the study by Buck (2014) support the influence of the Post 9/11 GI Bill on military family members' ability to pursue higher education degrees. Under these provisions, more military spouses can attend college and obtain higher education degrees.

Supportive University Staff During Challenges

Institutions of higher education providing services to the military population, according to Bonura & Lovald (2015), should be prepared to understand their distinctive needs and challenges. For example, many military spouses shared how their university instructors and professors reached out to them during difficult times, such as their spouse's combat deployments and family separations, and how this act positively impacted their ability to complete their college degree programs. They further shared their experiences and challenges in completing their degree programs; however, they noted that their professors' support gave them the courage to persevere once enrolled. Others converged on being appreciative of university staff for treating them with respect.

Most noticeable were the participants who appreciated having knowledgeable university staff who understood the military culture. In addition, the results indicated that military spouses appreciated having supportive university staff who guided them through the admissions process.

Self-efficacy and Self-confidence

The military spouses expressed the need for self-efficacy and self-confidence to complete college degrees. Several shared how living in poverty as children damaged their self-confidence and self-worth. However, once they were encouraged by others, they gained the confidence to pursue job opportunities, gaining the courage to enter higher education institutions. They expressed gratitude to mentors who inspired them to pursue advanced degrees for career advancement.

Several felt that obtaining college degrees increased their confidence, especially as the families transitioned from the military into the civilian sector. Also, many participants were first-generation college students, which gave them a sense of self-confidence and achievement. The findings from the research by Lutz (2014) support this study on the direct relationships between military spouses' resiliency and how these motivation skills empowered their decisions to pursue educational opportunities. Riggs and Riggs' (2011) findings also support the resilience factors that military spouses demonstrate within the military culture, especially during difficult times, such as combat missions, frequent moves, and frequent school changes. Deployment separations constitute a substantial stressor for their families (Riggs, & Riggs, 2011). The findings of Wang, Nyutu, Tran, and Spears (2015) are congruent with this study's findings on the need for social support from friends to increase feelings of psychological well-being.

Overcoming Barriers and Challenges in the Classroom

The military spouses described their experiences in the classroom as challenging when balancing their families and the responsibilities of being college students. Many military spouses expressed concern for their classmates' and professors' lack of awareness of the military culture. According to the research literature, instructors should be trained to refer a student for support services when needed and to apply the appropriate strategies for offering an extension on class assignments and incomplete grades (Bonura & Lovald, 2015). Nevertheless, most military spouses displayed high levels of resiliency and perseverance despite the barriers and challenges in the classroom. Many military spouses candidly discussed the challenges of being a spouse, supporting their spouses, and caring for families, in addition to the challenges they faced while pursuing degrees in higher education.

Many spouses spoke about barriers such as responding to different time zones in their online programs and the difficulties of responding to class discussion boards and turning in group assignments. Given the transient nature of the military lifestyle, the availability of online education in overseas locations, and the capacity to continue education with one institution despite frequent relocations, many military members and their families choose to study at online institutions (Bonura & Lovald, 2015). Others discussed balancing additional childcare responsibilities, full-time jobs, and student coursework as their most challenging experiences as students and military spouses. Gleiman and Swearingen (2012) support the research findings of significant barriers and challenges faced by military spouses pursuing degrees in higher education.

According to Gleiman and Swearingen (2012), the challenges include social stressors, such as domestic and international relocation, deployment and family separation, and the reunion and reorganization of the family. These social factors significantly affect military students' retention and academic progression. The findings from Jebo (2005) support many of the barriers and challenges expressed by male military spouses. Jebo (2005) suggested that male military spouses were often subjected to marginalization and discriminatory treatment from active-duty service members and female military spouses in the classroom. In military culture, primary males are the active-duty sponsor; the spouse is traditional except for the submissive role within the relationship. Therefore, active-duty males differently treat male spouses. Jorgenson and Lin's (2010) findings suggested that military spouses experience challenges such as the demands of childcare, frequent moves, job demands, and the absence of degree programs in their new locations. Gleiman and Swearingen's (2012) findings also support many of the personal narratives and experiences of military spouses regarding overcoming challenges in higher education classrooms.

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The findings from Hall's (2010) research are like the findings from this study on the Importance of understanding the military culture and encouraging them to accomplish their educational goals.

Encouragement from Professors Influenced Motivation and Persistence

Military spouses shared that college professors who took a personal interest in their educational endeavors influenced their motivation and persistence to continue pursuing their higher education degrees. Most described their college professors as significant role models willing to provide additional support to help them matriculate through their courses. Several military spouses expressed how many educators and professors were actively engaged in providing academic and emotional support inside and outside the classrooms. They unanimously agreed that their professors provided teaching and learning strategies and suggested additional tutoring and academic support when needed. According to the findings from Rouse (2011), education professionals should focus on developing cultural competencies for diverse student populations and attempt to understand the cultural knowledge they bring into the classrooms. It is equally essential for professionals to interact with these diverse student populations in the higher education environment.

Envisioning Future Educational Goals and Aspirations

Military spouses openly shared their visions for future educational goals and aspirations. Most pursuing undergraduate degrees plan to continue to an advanced degree program upon graduation. Several who had master's degrees were satisfied with their degree completion and felt their graduate degree would satisfy their career advancement requirements. Some military spouses wanted to start terminal degree programs to obtain qualifications for senior-level administrative positions. Bonura and Lovald (2015) indicated that military students bring unique experiences, insights, challenges, and skills into higher education classrooms. Therefore, educators should be conscious of students from the military culture and provide them with the support needed for educational accomplishments.

Ability to Balance Work and Family Life

The military spouses discussed how supporting their sponsor's physical and emotional well-being played a significant role in the stability and well-being of their family. The findings from this study support the findings of Wang et al. (2015). They found that military spouses'

social support is often partitioned between family and friends and is considered an essential aspect of military life. Previous research findings indicated that younger military spouses (Johnson et al., 2007) are more at risk for poor coping during deployment than mature wives (Ward et al., 2011). Furthermore, Wang et al. (2015) found that supportive behaviors of others in the community often increased well-being and contributed to how the spouses managed everyday challenges. The military communities, active duty, and retirees understand the demands and complexities of military life and tend to support each other when balancing daily demands.

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Implications for Change

Everyone has the legal right to an education and should be treated with respect. According to the Equal Educational Opportunities Act (EEOA) of 1974, all students, regardless of ethnicity and cultural capital, should be able to acquire an education without discrimination. The researcher, therefore, suggests that policies are in place for the military population, especially the military spouse population. Equally important, cultural capital is the acquired knowledge and skills the student brings to the classroom.

However, not all student's cultural capital is viewed equally. The researcher suggests that professors and universities recognize and embrace the knowledge that military spouses bring into the classroom and use this knowledge to develop classroom discussions and assignments on the concept of cultural capital. Military spouses tend to have difficulty adjusting to dominant cultures due to frequent school changes and geographical relocations. Hence, suggested that university personnel involve the military population to ensure they have the same equal opportunity as other students. The research findings from Gleiman and Swearingen (2012)

support the researcher's suggestions for implications for change for adult educators. Their findings support providing better service to military spouses who are pursuing degrees in higher education by considering a broader range of implications such as institutional changes, programmatic efforts, and instructional methodologies that may facilitate their success

Another key strategy would be identifying educational professionals knowledgeable about federal education benefits. This could improve recruitment techniques and eliminate many of the admission, educational, and financial problems experienced by the military spouse. Equally importantly, creating teaching and learning strategies to support culturally diverse students, such as the military populations in the classroom, remains a significant challenge. Based on the responses of the military spouses, the following recurring themes the factors that empowered them to persist in earning a college degree included: (a) financial and educational benefits from the military, (b) supportive university staff during challenges, (c) self-efficacy and self-confidence, (d) overcoming barriers and challenges in the classroom, (g) envisioning future educational goals and aspirations, and (h) ability to balance work and family life. These factors empower the military population to look at higher education to improve their social and economic status.

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