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A grounded theory of online coping by parents of military service members

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Abstract

Although parents of adult service members play a pivotal role in the dynamics of military family life, they tend to be overlooked in research on military families. We seek to shed light on their experiences by investigating online discourse about having a son or daughter serving in the U.S. military. We used grounded theory methods to create a model depicting the process by which parents communicated in the online forums. At the heart of the model was the central theme of parents coping with the stress of military life. Parents were troubled by losing time with their child and feeling alone because of his or her absence, which led them to feel chaotic emotions. They coped with their stress by seeking support, relating to others with similar experiences, and focusing on the positive. We consider both the theoretical implications of these findings for understanding coping and supportive communication and the practical implications for meeting the needs of military parents.

Keywords

Computer-mediated communication, coping, grounded theory, military parents, social support

Parents are profoundly affected by the experience of having a son or daughter serving in the U.S. military. Although many parents feel proud of their adult child's commitment to protecting his or her country (Crow & Myers-Bowman, 2011; Orme & Kehoe, 2011), the

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child's military service also takes a toll on parents (Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008; Orme & Kehoe, 2011; Slaven-Lee, Padden, Andrews, & Fitzpatrick, 2011). Parents may experience fear, worry, and anxiety about their child's physical and psychological well-being as well as feelings of helplessness about being unable to protect their son or daughter (Crow & Myers-Bowman, 2011). The stress of a child's military service may be compounded by a lack of information about his or her safety (Andres, Moelker, & Soeters, 2011; Crow & Myers-Bowman, 2011; Orme & Kehoe, 2011). In sum, parents face a number of challenges when their child serves in the military.

Parents play an important role in how military life is perceived by both their children and the civilian community (LaRossa, 2016; Legree et al., 2000). For instance, parents' attitudes toward the military can influence their children's decisions to pursue a military career (Legree et al., 2000), and media depictions of mothers of combat personnel can shape public perceptions of war (Slattery & Garner, 2007). Most research on military families excludes parents of service members, focusing instead on romantic partners and children of military personnel (Blaisure, Saathoff-Wells, Pereira, MacDermid Wadsworth, & Dombro, 2012; Hall, 2008). However, the little research involving parents implies that they experience military life differently than romantic partners and children of service members. For example, parents are socialized to be protectors of their sons and daughters, a role not typically occupied by spouses or children (Crow & Myers-Bowman, 2011; Garner & Slattery, 2010; Slattery & Garner, 2007, 2011). Given the critical importance of parents to the dynamics of military families, scholars have called for systematic investigation of parents' experiences of a child's military service (Andres et al., 2011; Blaisure et al., 2012; Hall, 2008; LaRossa, 2016; Polusny et al., 2014).

We seek to illuminate the experiences of military parents by investigating the messages they exchange in online support forums about having a child serving in the military. Computer-mediated venues offer geographically dispersed individuals the opportunity to interact with others who have common experiences but would be inaccessible otherwise (Mikal, Rice, Abeyta, & DeVilbiss, 2013; Wright & Muhtaseb, 2011). To document how parents communicate in online forums about having a son or daughter serving in the military, we employ grounded theory methods to examine the experiences of having a child in the military and the strategies parents use to navigate those experiences. Our resulting model makes three contributions to the literature: It advances theory on stress and coping, documents how military parents seek support through online communication, and suggests pragmatic advice for addressing the concerns military parents express.

Stress and coping of military parents

The few studies investigating military parents emphasize (a) the emotional tenor of having a son or daughter in the military and (b) the coping resources parents use to manage the challenges of military life. We review research on military parents in the following subsections, and then we turn our attention to computer-mediated communication as a platform for seeking support. Finally, we advance a guiding research question derived from both literatures.

Emotions surrounding a child's military service

Parents describe having a son or daughter in the military as a deeply emotional experience. On one hand, many parents feel proud of their child's service and sacrifice (Crow & Myers-Bowman, 2011), and they are pleased by the personal growth they observe in their child, including greater maturity, more independence, better financial outlook, and stronger family ties (Andres et al., 2011; Orme & Kehoe, 2011). On the other hand, their pride and satisfaction often is tinged with negative emotions such as fear, anger, and anxiety (Crow & Myers-Bowman, 2011). These mixed emotions may stem from the uncertainty embedded in military life (Crow & Myers-Bowman, 2011). Deployment, for example, can be an emotionally laden and uncertainty-provoking experience for parents of service members. Many parents feel distress, worry, and concern during deployment, particularly in regard to their child's physical and mental health (Crow & Myers-Bowman, 2011; Polusny et al., 2014; Slaven-Lee et al., 2011). They also may feel anxiety about the logistics of deployment (e.g., duration, location, mission) and the availability of support for their child during deployment (Polusny et al., 2014). In addition, their feelings are likely to shift across the stages of the deployment cycle (e.g., fear of the unknown during pre-deployment, worry about danger during deployment, anxiety about reconnecting upon reunion; Pincus, House, Christenson, & Adler, 2001). Thus, parents may feel strong emotions—often of conflicting valence—regarding their child's military service.

Social support as a coping strategy

Other work on parents of service members centers on social support as a resource for coping with the challenges of having a child in the military (e.g., Andres et al., 2011; Orme & Kehoe, 2011). The coping process occurs as a transactional relationship between the person and the environment (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980); individuals appraise a stimulus as stressful when they perceive that the demands of the environment outweigh their personal capacity to manage those demands (Lazarus & Launier, 1978). They respond to stressful stimuli by calling on their resources for coping, including both instrumental assets and emotion regulation efforts (Cohen & Lazarus, 1979; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Social support is a primary coping resource for individuals in distress, including both romantic partners of service members (e.g., High, Jennings-Kelsall, Solomon, & Marshall, 2015; Maguire, 2012, 2015; Maguire & Sahlstein, 2012) and parents of service members (e.g., Andres et al., 2011; Crow, Myers, Ellor, Dolan, & Morissette, 2016; Faber et al., 2008; Orme & Kehoe, 2011).

Supportive communication involves "verbal and nonverbal behaviors enacted with the primary intention of improving the psychological state of another person" (Jones & Bodie, 2014, p. 371). Supportive communication may be emotional, informational, or instrumental in nature (Helgeson & Cohen, 1996; House, 1981). Emotional support involves expressing care and concern, informational support involves offering information or advice, and instrumental support involves providing tangible goods or services (Helgeson & Cohen, 1996). Parents of service members identify emotional support and informational support as among their greatest needs (Andres et al., 2011; Orme & Kehoe, 2011).

Emotional support can be useful for coping with the intense emotions parents may experience as their child pursues a military career. For example, parents may feel ambiguous loss when their child leaves for training or an assignment, but those feelings do not necessarily subside when the child returns (Crow et al., 2016; Faber et al., 2008), and parents may grieve the child they knew prior to his or her service in the military (Crow et al., 2016). Emotional support can help parents cope with such feelings. Not surprisingly, parents' desire for emotional support may be escalated by the deployment of a son or daughter into a combat zone. Parents express greater needs for emotional support, for example, during deployments that pose substantial risk of harm to their child (Andres et al., 2011).

Parents also report a high need for informational support when their child is serving in the military (Andres et al., 2011; Orme & Kehoe, 2011). Military life can be fraught with uncertainty for parents as they navigate the challenges associated with their child's military career. Information—whether it comes from their child, from family members, from friends, from the media, or from the military—is a valuable resource for parents trying to make sense of their experience (Crow & Myers-Bowman, 2011; Orme & Kehoe, 2011). Accordingly, many parents rely on informational support as a way to manage the ambiguity associated with military life (Faber et al., 2008).

Studies of both civilian families (Basinger, Wehrman, & McAninch, 2016; Kaunonen, Tarkka, Paunonen, & Laippala, 1999) and military families (Maguire, 2015; Maguire & Sahlstein, 2012; Rossetto, 2015) suggest that supportive communication is particularly helpful when it comes from individuals who have experienced similar circumstances. Accordingly, parents of service members are likely to see other military-connected individuals as uniquely positioned to provide support. For example, military parents identify others who can relate to the experience of having a loved one in the military, including relatives, friends, and their child's romantic partner, as useful sources of informational support (Andres et al., 2011). Not only can similar others provide relevant information, but they also can empathize because their circumstances resonate with parents' own experiences (Crow & Myers-Bowman, 2011).

Computer-mediated supportive communication

Up to this point, we have reviewed research establishing that (a) parents of service members value social support and (b) supportive communication from those who can relate is especially beneficial (Andres et al., 2011; Crow & Myers-Bowman, 2011; Rossetto, 2015). Support is frequently provided in the context of close relationships (Sarason, Sarason, & Gurung, 2001), but in today's society, individuals also turn to online communities via computer-mediated channels. They disclose distress in online venues for several reasons, including self-expression, catharsis, and support-seeking, and they reap personal and social gains from interpersonal engagement that happens online (e.g., Boniel-Nissim & Barak, 2013; Rains & Keating, 2011). In this study, we focus on online forums as a computer-mediated venue designed for the purpose of engaging similar others. A key benefit of online platforms is that they facilitate connections between individuals who would otherwise be incapable of interacting because of geographic distance (Mikal et al., 2013; Wright & Muhtaseb, 2011). Computer-mediated

communication offers a way for individuals to build relationships with similar others who can provide relevant support (High & Solomon, 2011; Mikal et al., 2013).

Recent work has considered the communication of military families in online forums. Jennings-Kelsall, Aloia, Solomon, Marshall, and Leifker (2012) studied how Marine Corps wives, fiancées, and girlfriends communicated with others about the stressors they experienced during deployment. High, Jennings-Kelsall, Solomon, and Marshall (2015) used the same data set to examine supportive communication, finding that individuals sought informational, emotional, and network support in online forums. Together, these studies illustrate how military families use online venues to engage with others who have similar experiences. Although research has established the utility of emotional and informational support for military parents (e.g., Andres et al., 2011; Orme & Kehoe, 2011), the nature of parents' communication in online venues remains unknown.

The content of supportive communication plays an important role in how individuals handle stress. The dyadic coping perspective, for instance, argues that individuals use communication to restore balance when stress disrupts their environment (Badr, Carmack, Kashy, Cristofanilli, & Revenson, 2010). Similarly, research on supportive communication posits that the content of a message shapes how individuals appraise it (Bodie, Burleson, & Jones, 2012; Burleson, 2009a, 2009b). In fact, the features of a message are an essential factor in determining whether individuals view the message as helpful (Burleson, 2009b). Given the importance of message content for coping with stress, we contend that a key task for advancing research on military parents is to elucidate the content of their communication about their child's service in the military. We examine online forums to identify how parents communicate about their stress and solicit support from other military-connected individuals. We propose the following research question to guide our investigation:

Research Question: How do parents of service members communicate in online support forums about their experiences of having a child in the military?

Method

After obtaining approval from the university's institutional review board, we gathered data for this project from publicly available[1] online forums in which individuals discussed their experiences with U.S. military life. To identify the online forums, we performed searches using terms such as "military life and family," "military families and support," "military family and coping," "military life and online support," and "military and marriage,"[2] which generated discussions from 37 online forums. We collected discussion threads that were created up to 3 years prior to data collection, producing a total of 5,925 pages of double-spaced text. Then, we narrowed the data set to include only threads pertaining to the experiences of parents with an adult child serving in the military. We utilized key words such as "mother/mom," "father/dad," "parent," "daughter," "son," and "child" to select threads that included an entry written from the perspective of a parent of a service member. This process yielded 584 pages of double-spaced text. We used the parent-focused subset of the data for all of our analyses.

We analyzed the data in four stages according to grounded theory methods identified by Charmaz (2006) and Corbin and Strauss (2008). In the first stage, the first author and a graduate student researcher engaged in line-by-line *open coding* of 10% of the data. The goals of open coding were to examine actions in the data while allowing codes to emerge rather than imposing them (Charmaz, 2006). We did this by assigning gerunds to each line of the data (e.g., "recognizing change in daughter," "feeling isolated from the military"), which allowed us to focus on the actions participants described rather than organizing the data by topics (e.g., "changes," "isolation;" Charmaz, 2006) and oriented us toward process instead of description (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser, 1978). After each person coded 5% of the data separately, we met to discuss the dimensions of actions in the data, to combine any similar codes, and to identify the most prominent categories characterizing parents' experiences. Then, we created a codebook containing a conceptual label for each category, a definition, and illustrative quotations. The codebook included eight categories: (a) seeking support, (b) feeling alone, (c) relating to others, (d) providing support, (e) managing emotion, (f) showing strength, (g) losing time, and (h) recognizing the positive.

The second stage was *focused coding*, which involved using the most significant categories from open coding to understand larger portions of data (Charmaz, 2006). During this phase, we trained three undergraduate research assistants who were blind to the goals of the study to apply the codebook to the data. They received extensive instructions on how to identify passages that fit into each category (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008), and then they worked independently to apply the codebook to a new segment of the data representing 10% of the total data set. The two goals of this step were to (a) refine the codebook and (b) ensure that the judges applied the codebook similarly to the data. The judges met in person with the first author several times during this phase to clarify differences among the categories. After the judges coded the 10% segment of the data in common, we finalized the codebook, and then we divided the remaining 90% of the data among the same three judges to code independently.

The third stage of analysis involved *axial coding* (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The goal of axial coding was to delineate relationships among the codes and to theoretically reconstruct the data (Charmaz, 2006). We began by partitioning the focused coding results into separate files dedicated to each of the eight categories. The first author and three graduate student researchers read through the separate files and the data at large to familiarize themselves with the data in each category. Then, we met to discuss our analysis of the relationships among the categories.

Our axial coding indicated that the central theme in the data was *coping with the stress of military life*, so we constructed a preliminary model around the coping process. Moreover, our analysis revealed higher order categories that encompassed smaller categories in the codebook. For example, we combined the category *showing strength* with the more general category of *recognizing the positive*. We also realized that *providing support*, which had been its own category in the codebook, was more accurately depicted as individuals' responses to posts about all of the other categories in the data. Finally, we relabeled the category *managing emotion* as *feeling chaotic emotions* because the data emphasized parents' experience of volatile feelings rather than active efforts to handle those feelings.

The final stage involved evaluating whether the adjustments we made during the axial coding process were commensurate with the data at large. Accordingly, the first author recoded portions of the data with the goal of assessing whether the modifications to the codebook were compatible with the data. Once the modifications were verified, we worked to fine-tune our grounded theory model. We alternated between meeting to discuss relationships among the categories and returning to the data until a high degree of theoretical saturation was reached (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Throughout each stage of analysis, we drafted memos to be reflexive about the data and the relationships we identified.

Results

A model depicting the process by which parents communicated with others in the online forums is shown in Figure 1. At the core of parents' interactions was coping with the stress of military life. They were distressed by the perceptions of lost time with their child and feeling alone during his or her absence, both of which led them to feel chaotic emotions. They used three strategies to cope with the stress of military life: seeking support, relating to others in similar circumstances, and recognizing the positive outcomes that accompanied their child's service in the military. We describe each component of the model in the following subsections, along with sample quotations lightly edited for readability. Ellipses in brackets mark places where quotations were abridged for brevity.

Coping with the stress of military life

The central category in the model was coping with the stress of having a child serve in the military. Many parents described their distress in terms of emotional upheaval: (a) "My son leaves for boot on the 14th of June and it's really tearing me apart. I thought I could handle it but I can't stop crying." (b) "The first month of basic is heart wrenching as a parent." (c) "It's crazy the emotional range you feel when your child zips out of your life." (d) "I think I might go crazy." Accordingly, their comments were directed toward identifying, understanding, and managing their distress. They saw the online forums as an outlet for coping with their feelings: (a) "I became very depressed. I had no idea what I was doing but googled Navy support groups. I found this site." (b) "I find myself this morning just sitting here not knowing what to do with myself or how to react or what is next. I joined this site last night to help me through this process." (c) "I still miss him though I'm not emotional as the day after he left. Reading the responses to this thread and other areas of this site have been very helpful." Overall, parents' communication was geared toward coping with the stress of their child's military service, with coping representing the most central experience for posting in the online forums.

Antecedents to coping

The data revealed three antecedent conditions preceding coping. These antecedents represented challenges that parents experienced because of their child's military service:

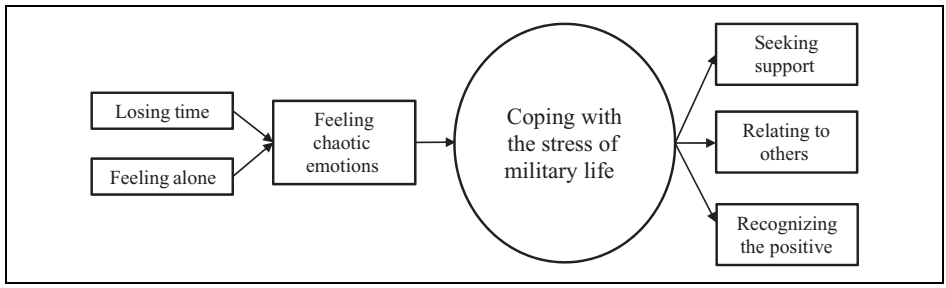

Figure 1. A model of military parents' coping in online forums.

losing time, feeling alone, and feeling chaotic emotions. The challenges of losing time and feeling alone led military parents to feel chaotic emotions, and those volatile emotions, in turn, prompted parents to manage their stress through coping.

Losing time. One of the challenges of having a child in the military was parents' sense that they were losing time with their son or daughter. Parents were acutely aware of the breadth and depth of experiences they were missing with their child. Some parents mentioned missing mundane experiences, such as everyday interactions with their child: "I am going to miss our daily talks and time spent together." Others focused on the absence of their service member during major family events and holidays: (a) "This is his first birthday/holiday season away from home." (b) "He was gone for Father's Day, my birthday, and he will be gone for his birthday." (c) "I also had the holiday blues missing my son." (d) "He is about to be a father in the next week or so and I am so proud of the life he is starting for his new little family. He will miss the birth of his daughter." Despite assurances from other forum participants that time passes quickly during military training and deployment (e.g., "Trust me, it WILL get easier and the time will fly." "One week down . . . not really that much time left when you look at it that way!!!" "Hang in there . . . it goes faster than you think!"), parents noted how difficult it was to cope with time lost with their son or daughter.

Feeling alone. A second challenge for parents was feeling alone when their child was away for military service. Many parents reflected on how they felt when their child was gone: "I never thought I could miss anyone as much as I miss him." Others described feeling isolated (e.g., "My house is really lonely."), hyperaware of the quietness in the house (e.g., "It's amazing how loud the silence can be."), or saddened by reminders of their child (e.g., "When I got home I saw his high school baseball cap on the coat hook and took it up to his room. That's when I lost it. He wasn't there. He wouldn't be there for a long time."). These comments underscored the loneliness parents felt when their child was away pursuing a military career.

The absence of a child for military service was distressing to parents for two reasons. First, parents were struck by how their child's service in the military represented a major transition from childhood to adulthood. For instance, some parents mentioned having an empty nest after their child left: (a) "He is our youngest and now we are empty nesters."

(b) "He wasn't only our youngest son (so now the nest is empty), he is our best friend. We just walk around feeling really sorry for ourselves and missing him terribly." (c) "Becoming an 'empty nester' is a tough transition. I know that it was for me. After so many years of hustle and bustle, the silence can be deafening." The child's absence after years in the household seemed to magnify the loneliness parents felt: (a) "But 18 years of him there every day and now I haven't seen or heard from him going on 2 weeks so far is very hard." (b) "Yes it's very sad for the youngest to leave. I am astounded at the void they leave. He must have had his own noise frequency because the house is so quiet, even with two other kids still here."

A second reason parents struggled with loneliness was that they felt isolated by the military infrastructure, and they were disappointed by how few support mechanisms the military provided for them. They complained that many of the resources offered by the military were directed toward spouses and children of service members rather than family members more generally. Their frustration at the lack of attention from military administration was one reason they relied on the online forums: (a) "It helps knowing other parents have gone through this, not a lot of information or support for the parents that we have been able to find." (b) "I want to start a group and set up a website for us Military Parents of Single Service Members to help walk other parents through the effects of deployment . . . It is VERY SAD how we are treated!" Parents of single service members were particularly attuned to how they were marginalized by the peer-led family readiness group (FRG) offered by their child's unit: (a) "While my son was deployed [. . .], leaves were given to married soldiers, irrespective of their seniority. The FRG shared little information with us and, according to my son, the married women who run the FRG like to think they're in control of everyone." (b) "My son actually complained [. . .] that all the functions planned on the post were for [wives and children]." Feeling alone was a salient experience for parents, and their loneliness was compounded by a lack of support from the military. They coped by turning to the online forums for help.

Feeling chaotic emotions. Both losing time and feeling alone led parents to experience chaotic emotions. A host of volatile emotions characterized their experiences, including pride, sadness, worry, happiness, and fear. For example, they were proud of their child's service, but they also described intense grief reactions to his or her absence. Examples included (a) "I am going through a dichotomy of feelings because this has been his dream since he was able to recognize soldiers (pretoddler) but hell week for me due to not knowing." (b) "I go through periods of being upbeat about all that is ahead of him and then when I walk by his room or see some of his things, the emotions start to well up." (c) "The hardest part for me is I have these dual emotions going on simultaneously when I think about my son." Parents frequently described their emotions using the imagery of a roller coaster: (a) "Fasten your seat belts and please hold onto the bar. The roller coaster is just getting started." (b) "We who have been through it know it as the 'roller coaster.' Your emotions will go up and down like crazy!" (c) "I am on that roller coaster ride." (d) "I feel like a ping-pong ball, going back and forth between feelings of complete sadness to stuffing my feelings and being strong." These data depicted the emotional turmoil parents felt about their child's service, which led them to cope with their stress by interacting in the online forums.

Coping strategies

Parents described three coping strategies to manage the stress of their child's involvement in the military. Notably, each coping strategy was geared toward helping parents restore emotional stability in response to the upheaval they were experiencing. The strategies were (a) seeking support, (b) relating to others, and (c) recognizing the positive in their circumstances.

Seeking support. One coping strategy was to seek support from others in the online forums. Parents pursued both informational and emotional support. At a basic level, parents sought information about how the military worked. They asked about issues such as military jargon (e.g., "Excuse us, but MOS? Is there a glossary of these terms somewhere?") and military training processes (e.g., "Do they have graduation after basic and another after AIT, or is it just one?" and "Does anyone know how the graduation works? My son told me briefly when it is but I don't know if we will get more information on it or anything about it. Does anyone have information on this?"). Parents were especially eager to gain information about how to communicate with their service member because staying in touch was of paramount importance to them: (a) "My question is: When will we get the dates of parents' visit and graduation time? And most important when are they allowed to call?" (b) "When can I expect to hear from him, how long does it take to get the letter everyone is talking about or get an address? Am I being too impatient? It's been a week." Parents sought information as a way to manage the stress of their child's military service.

Parents also solicited emotional support. They asked for care and concern from others to cope with their distress, and they requested reassurance that their emotional state would improve. For example, parents expressed sentiments such as (a) "I'm new to all this. Trying to cope. I need a good ear." (b) "I guess what I am in need of here is some moral support of my own." (c) "Please tell us it does get better." They worried for their child's safety and wondered how to remain resilient in the midst of their anxiety. Parents also described the volatility of their feelings as a way of gaining support: (a) "I wish I knew he was doing okay. So far I only have received the 'I'm here' phone call. Being former Navy myself I did not think I would feel this way about my son leaving. I know he's in good hands but I can't stop worrying." (b) "Will this get any easier as time goes on or am I gonna be on edge 24/7? I will always worry about my son but I love him more than he will ever know." (c) "I am very concerned for her well-being!" Parents desired both informational support and emotional support to help them cope with the stress of their child's military service.

Relating to others. Another coping strategy was to relate to parents who were experiencing similar circumstances. Although parents sought support in general, they particularly wanted to communicate with others who could empathize with their concerns. Many parents explicitly mentioned their desire to connect with individuals who understood what they were going through: (a) "Looking for a website where other parents are going through what I am." (b) "I am looking for feedback from people who have been there." (c) "Would like to hear some stories about how others here handled it." (d) "Has anyone

else gone through this before?" Parents asserted that anyone lacking firsthand experience with the military could not relate to their constraints in a meaningful way: (a) "Some people (who haven't been in military) think I should just push my way in there." (b) "By the way, do go easy on the civilians because they have no clue. Just smile to yourself and know you're a part of an exclusive club of Human Beings who go where others won't to do what others can't." Parents worked to manage their stress by connecting with other parents who shared common experiences.

Recognizing the positive. A third coping strategy was to emphasize the positive outcomes that come from having a child in the military. For example, parents reflected on the constructive changes occurring in their child, which attuned them to the benefits of military life rather than the challenges: (a) "I know it cannot be easy what he is experiencing but I do believe that it will make him into the man I know he can be." (b) "Pride in her accomplishments helps to offset the worries and concerns. I know that she is very good at what she does and am excited to watch her progress." (c) "The changes in him were positive ones, nothing negative." (d) "While writing the letter, I was overcome with a feeling of pride. Not just because he was a part of the Navy but because of the character my son possesses. Over the last few weeks before he left, I was noticing a level of commitment, strength, and courage that I had never seen before." Other parents of service members aided in these realizations by describing the advantages of the military: (a) "This can be a really good life if you are open to it and let it be. It's a matter of opening up your mind to the possibilities and what is out there." (b) "His sacrifice, and YOURS, will be worth it in the end." (c) "I will very humbly write . . . it is worth it . . . you and your family will return with a renewed and reinvigorated sense of pride in your (our) son and those around him." Focusing on the benefits of military service was a way for parents to cope with their circumstances.

Discussion

Our results suggest that an adult child's service in the military is a tumultuous experience for parents. Parents participated in the online forums to cope with the stress of having a son or daughter in the military. They were acutely aware of time lost with their child and feeling alone because of his or her absence, which led them to feel intensely chaotic emotions. They worked to cope with their stress by seeking informational and emotional support, connecting with individuals who could empathize and offer insider advice, and prioritizing positive outcomes rather than merely focusing on the challenges of being a military parent. Our findings are useful for (a) contributing to theory on stress and coping, (b) filling a gap in research by elucidating how parents experience their child's pursuit of a military career, and (c) implying practical recommendations to support parents of military personnel.

Parents coping with the stress of military life

The central experience for parents posting in the online forums was coping with the stress of their child's involvement in a military career, including absences and threats of

harm due to training, domestic assignments, and overseas deployments. Our results intersect in interesting ways with theories of stress and coping that identify problem-focused activity and emotion-focused activity as two primary modes of coping (Folkman & Lazarus, 1980, 1985). Whereas problem-focused efforts are aimed at alleviating the threat itself, emotion-focused efforts are directed toward feeling better about one's stress (Cohen & Lazarus, 1979; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Our data depicted parents engaging in emotion-focused coping strategies almost exclusively, presumably because they were dealing with a stressor incurred in their role as a bystander of their adult child's pursuit of a military career, which rendered problem-focused coping strategies relatively moot. Parents engaged in a variety of emotion-focused coping efforts. They pursued informational support with the implied goal of increasing their perceptions of control over their circumstances, and they sought emotional support with the implied goal of alleviating their worry and anxiety (e.g., Helgeson & Cohen, 1996). They also attempted to connect with similar others, perhaps to establish a sense of community and combat their feelings of isolation. Finally, they emphasized the benefits of military service, presumably to reappraise the situation as having advantages both for their child (e.g., becoming a mature, responsible adult) and for themselves (e.g., taking pride in their child's accomplishments). In total, these strategies represent emotion-focused coping efforts geared toward assuaging the stress parents experienced when their child was geographically distant, out of regular contact, and/or in danger due to military service.

By disclosing their distress in online forums dedicated to social support for military personnel and their loved ones, military parents engaged with others in similar circumstances. A notable feature of these exchanges was the emphasis parents placed on their perceived similarities with other military-connected individuals and their perceived differences with civilians. Maguire (2012, 2015) argued that one hallmark of a military family is adapting to the pervasive constraints of military culture. The U.S. military culture, like any other culture, makes salient individuals' identity as either in-group members who fit into the culture or out-group members who do not (e.g., Maguire, 2012, 2015; Maguire & Sahlstein, 2012; Rossetto, 2015). Our results resonate with Rossetto's (2015) findings that not only is support from cultural insiders particularly valuable but also that support from cultural outsiders is especially unhelpful. For example, parents described civilians as having "no clue" about military life, in contrast with other military parents who were able to understand the constraints of military involvement. These findings emphasize the prominence of the gulf parents saw between in-group and out-group membership, which parallels the military–civilian divide apparent in previous research (Pew Research Center, 2012).

On a deeper level, our data showcase how parents struggled with ambiguous boundaries characterizing their own in-group versus out-group status. In general, parents portrayed themselves as military insiders grappling with concerns that civilians simply could not understand. At the same time, they described feeling excluded from military support groups that catered to the needs of romantic partners and children of service members. Our findings on this point echo those of Sahlstein Parcell and Maguire (2014a), who found that some Army wives felt marginalized by the FRG led by spouses of unit commanders, particularly those who fell outside the norms of traditional military family structures. Similarly, parents in the online forums expressed frustration at the lack

of services directed toward them and the failure of the FRG to share information with them. Our results, coupled with those of Sahlstein Parcell and Maguire (2014a), illustrate ways that support structures can isolate—rather than assist—individuals in diverse family configurations.

Parents in our data set voiced several dilemmas reminiscent of Goldsmith's (2001, 2004; Goldsmith & Fitch, 1997) normative theory of social support. Her theory proposes that supportive interactions require communicators to juggle multiple, and sometimes divergent, goals. One such dilemma involved navigating the tension between inclusion and exclusion. Parents actively claimed a military identity (frequently ending their posts with mottos such as "Army Strong!" and "Semper Fi!"), but they felt prohibited from accessing the roles, privileges, and opportunities afforded to military family members. A second dilemma entailed being torn between being a protective parent versus a patriotic American. Parents wanted to keep their child out of harm's way and shield him or her from danger, but they also championed their child's service and felt honored to sacrifice for the greater good (e.g., Slattery & Garner, 2007). A third dilemma involved struggling to stay connected with the service member in the wake of the communication constraints imposed by the military. Parents craved updates via letters and telephone calls, and they lamented (and, in some cases, resented) the restricted access they had to their child due to military regulations. A fourth dilemma involved navigating conflicting emotions. Parents felt caught between incongruous sentiments such as "I am proud, but I am worried" and "I am lonely, but I am excited," and "I am strong, but I am fearful." Not only are these dilemmas consistent with Goldsmith's (2004) ideas about social support, but they also supplement a growing literature identifying paradoxes facing military family members (e.g., Maguire, Heinemann-LaFave, & Sahlstein, 2013; Rossetto, 2015; Wilson, Gettings, Hall, & Pastor, 2015) and provide insight into the potentially competing goals parents pursue when seeking support regarding their child's military service.

Implications for research on military families

Our findings complement and extend recent work identifying online forums as a space for military family members to find support as they cope with the stress of having a loved one in the military. For example, Jennings-Kelsall et al. (2012) identified six stressors that romantic partners of Marines experienced during deployment: (a) feeling stuck in a state of transition, (b) changing as a result of military life, (c) being uncertain about the romantic partnership, (d) feeling lonely during the partner's absence, (e) feeling alienated from social network members who cannot relate to the military lifestyle, and (f) anxiety. High et al. (2015) found evidence of informational, emotional, and network support in the same online forums. With respect to overlap between their results and our own, some of the stressors Jennings-Kelsall et al. (2012) identified are compatible with the ones parents discussed, including feeling intense emotions, missing the service member, and experiencing isolation. Parents in our study desired knowledge to understand military life as well as compassion to deal with their distress, which comports with High et al.'s (2015) findings about individuals' needs for informational and emotional support. These similarities suggest commonality in how parents and romantic partners experience a loved one's military service.

At the same time, key differences in the stressors depicted by military parents in our study compared to the stressors described by romantic partners in prior work underscore the importance of acknowledging the unique experiences of parents. Parents, for example, did not appear to grapple with uncertainty about their relationship with the service member as romantic partners did in Jennings-Kelsall et al.'s (2012) investigation. More broadly, feelings of loneliness manifested differently for parents in our study versus romantic partners in previous research. Whereas Jennings-Kelsall et al. (2012) found that romantic partners reflected on how the service member's absence affected not only them but also their young children, parents' loneliness in our study stemmed from watching the service member transition from childhood into adulthood and was exacerbated by a perceived lack of resources from the military. Accordingly, our results highlight both what is similar and what is unique about having a loved one pursue a military career from the vantage point of a parent compared to a romantic partner. More generally, our findings suggest that a one-size-fits-all approach to addressing the needs of military families is inappropriate.

Practical implications

The results of our study have practical implications for assisting parents of service members. First, the military offers a variety of resources for helping families cope with the challenges of military life, most of which focus on strengthening the ties within families rather than fostering connections across families. For example, the FOCUS Family Resilience Training for Military Families program aids family members in building skills to ease reintegration after deployment (Lester et al., 2011). The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program for Strong Bonds program focuses on supporting military marriages and reducing the divorce rate among military couples (Allen, Stanley, Rhoades, Markman, & Loew, 2011). The Essential Life Skills for Military Families program addresses the needs of family members as they cope with relational and practical difficulties such as parenting and finances (Carroll et al., 2013). Although the value of such programs cannot be overstated, our findings also nominate communication between individuals who share common experiences, such as online support-seeking, as potentially useful. Working to connect similar others through online channels would appear to be a relatively efficient and low-cost way to help individuals cope with the challenges of military life. Given recent findings suggesting the utility of a telephone support group connecting romantic partners of service members (Nichols, Martindale-Adams, Graney, Zuber, & Burns, 2013), we are hopeful that a similar program using an online platform would be helpful for parents of military personnel.

More broadly, our results emphasize military parents as a population deserving attention. Whereas the bulk of support services are aimed at romantic partners and children of service members, our study and a handful of others demonstrate that military parents, too, encounter challenges (e.g., Crow & Myers-Bowman, 2011; Hall, 2008; Slaven-Lee et al., 2011). The parents in our study expressed frustration over a lack of programming to help them deal with their child's service in the military. Even activities designed to support military families, such as FRGs, drew complaints from parents about being geared exclusively toward romantic partners and children. Not only could

programs tailored to the specific needs of military parents have the potential to benefit the parents themselves, but given the key roles parents play in shaping both public perceptions of the military (LaRossa, 2016) and their children's decisions to pursue a military career (Legree et al., 2000), the military also could be enriched by such efforts. In particular, our data suggest that military parents could benefit from resources that (a) connect them with other military parents to foster interpersonal relationships, (b) provide mentors similar to FRG leaders who are exclusively dedicated to the needs of military parents, (c) supply educational materials for coping with the challenges of having a child in the military, and/or (d) offer avenues for accessing information about their child's welfare or about how to communicate with their child.

Limitations and directions for future research

Our results are constrained by several limitations. First, the nature of our data collection procedures precluded us from obtaining demographic characteristics of online forum participants beyond their self-identified role as a parent of a service member. Key variables such as age, gender, geographic location, military branch affiliation, parents' own service in the military, and even the number of individuals posting to the online forums were unavailable to us. This limitation is important in light of research suggesting that characteristics of both parents and service members shape their experiences. For example, mothers and fathers of service members report different emotions: Mothers worry more and miss their child more, and fathers have more positive attitudes toward the military (Andres et al., 2011). Moreover, the role parents play in supporting their service member may depend on their child's marital status: Single National Guard soldiers preparing for deployment report fewer family stressors but less support than partnered National Guard soldiers (Polusny et al., 2014). Many comments in our data set appeared to be from parents of young service members, single service members, and/or first-time deployed service members; however, those inferences are speculative given the absence of demographic data. Future investigations of parents' experiences should attend to demographic characteristics to tease out where meaningful differences exist.

A related issue is that we were not able to document whether parents were in the midst of their child's deployment, and if so, where in the deployment cycle their child was located. Both theory and research suggest that service members and their families face unique challenges in different stages of the deployment cycle (Pincus et al., 2001; Sahlstein, Maguire, & Timmerman, 2009), including questions about how to stay in touch, maintain their connection, and support each other effectively (Knobloch & Wilson, 2015; Sahlstein Parcell & Maguire, 2014b; Wilson et al., 2015). Many posts were geared toward the early stages of deployment, which makes sense if parents were visiting online forums to gain information about an unfamiliar experience, but we cannot draw definitive conclusions without knowing more about individuals' backgrounds. Because the obstacles and opportunities facing military families change across the deployment cycle (Pincus et al., 2001), a systematic investigation of parents' support needs across the trajectory of deployment would be useful.

A third limitation is that collecting online forum data precluded us from interacting with participants to clarify ambiguity in their comments, probe for deeper meaning, or

ask about their satisfaction with the support they received. A strength of our design is that we were able to access naturally occurring exchanges, but the downside is that we did not have the opportunity to drill down into specific issues of interest. Other methodologies, such as interviews and focus groups, allow for interaction between the researcher and participants to gain rich description as well as assessments of support quality (e.g., Rossetto, 2013; Sahlstein Parcell & Maguire, 2014b). We encourage scholars to build on our findings using research designs that furnish insight into both the short-term and long-term effectiveness of support offered in online forums.

Conclusion

We investigated the online communication of parents of service members to shed light on the experiences of this understudied population. Our findings revealed that parents' communication was characterized by coping with the stress of military life (see Figure 1), and parents viewed other participants in the online forums as in-group members who were positioned to offer assistance from a place of understanding. At the same time, our results shed light on the complex nature of membership in military culture: Parents simultaneously recognized their status as military insiders and lamented their exclusion from military infrastructure and resources such as FRGs. Above all, our study suggests that both researchers interested in investigating the dynamics of military families and practitioners devoted to improving the lives of military family members would benefit from considering the unique feelings, concerns, and constraints of military parents.

Authors' note

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Notes

1. We defined publicly available online forums as those that were either fully accessible to civilians or accessible to civilians who created a free account.
2. Our data came from a larger project investigating communication in online forums by military personnel and their romantic partners, family members, and friends. Some of the search terms, therefore, were geared toward that broader goal (e.g., "military and marriage") rather than toward our specific focus on military parents.

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