

SOCIAL CONNECTIONS AMONG UK
MILITARY SPOUSES:
THE INFLUENCES ON WELL-BEING

Report prepared for the Army Families Federation

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

BACKGROUND

Social connections, and the support received through them, are known to contribute to better mental health and well-being and improve coping during times of stress. However, the formation of these relationships can be hindered by the regular relocations that military families experience. Despite living within the military community, difficulties in creating social networks following a move can lead to fragmented social support, isolation, poorer mental health and well-being and lower relationship satisfaction among spouses of Service personnel. Problems maintaining relationships with family members and non-military friends during accompanied postings can also affect the well-being of military spouses.

Few studies of how military life influences the social connections of the spouses of Service personnel have been conducted in the UK, with most existing research from the US. This report addresses this gap by using interviews with UK military spouses to describe their experiences of relationships with other spouses, non-military friends, civilians and wider family members during accompanied postings and explore how these experiences might have influenced their well-being.

KEY FINDINGS

- Because of the physical distances involved in accompanied postings, maintaining relationships with family members and accessing reciprocal support could be difficult for some spouses, especially during time of crisis or heightened need
- The distances involved in accompanied postings meant that some spouses felt unable to perform certain kinship roles, resulting in stress and worry and disconnection from family networks
- Regimental and rank structures, as well as social activities hosted within the military community, were reported to both help and hinder the process of building social connections following an accompanied posting
- The support spouses received within the military community was described as contributing to a sense of belonging and for some, creating a surrogate family when far from home
- Leaving such close relationships could result in feelings of grief and loss
- Difficulties in building or maintaining social connections with other spouses, civilians or family members following accompanied postings were reported to leave spouses feeling isolated and disconnected
- The imposition of an assigned rank was reported to limit the social connections of spouses, either by restricting it to those with a husband of similar rank to their own or detachment from other spouses because of suspicions about their motives

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Given the importance of the military community in terms of support for spouses, the proposed Future Accommodation Model (FAM) should be evaluated to determine the impact on military families and potentially pre-empt some of the issues that spouses may experience as a result of the geographical dispersion of the military community
- Organisers of social activities for spouses should consider how the changing roles of women in society might influence the ability of some spouses to participate in these events and introduce alternative opportunities for spouses to interact
- Additional ways to improve spouse access to the military community should be explored for those unable to access the community within military bases, such as online forums or events held within the civilian community where they may be easier to attend
- Challenging the imposition of Service personnel rank on spouses would allow freer association within the military community, widening and deepen social connections and improve access to informal support

INTRODUCTION

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Social connections, and the support received through them, can contribute to better mental health and well-being and improve coping during times of stress [1, 2]. However, the formation of these relationships can be hindered by the regular relocations that military families experience. Within the UK, experiences of relocation (or *accompanied postings*) are common among military families – a recent survey found 27% of military families had moved in the last 12 months for military reasons [3]. Despite living within the military community, difficulties in creating social networks following a move can lead to social isolation, poorer mental health and well-being and lower relationship satisfaction among spouses of Service personnel despite the presence of the military community [4-19]. Problems maintaining relationships with family members and non-military friends during accompanied postings can also negatively affect the psychological well-being of spouses [20, 21].

Although relocation can be disruptive to the social networks and well-being of spouses/partners, there has been little UK-based research in this area, with most existing research from the US. This report addresses this gap in the research by using interviews with UK military spouses to describe their experiences of relationships with other spouses, non-military friends, civilians and family members during accompanied postings and to explore how these experiences might have influenced well-being.

OBJECTIVES

The objectives of this study were to:

- describe military spouse experiences of social connections during accompanied postings
- explore how these experiences were perceived to influence well-being

This report is based on findings from a PhD conducted at the King's Centre for Military Health Research, King's College London, and made possible with funding from the Economic and Social Research Council and the Army Families Federation.¹ This report discusses the findings relating to military spouse experiences of social connections during accompanied postings and how these influenced well-being.

- Interviews were conducted with spouses who took part in the Children of Military Fathers' study, which was established to examine the impact of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) on the outcomes of children of Service personnel [22]
- Spouses/partners who consented to follow-up were eligible to take part if they were:
 - the spouse of a currently serving member of the UK Armed Forces who had at least one accompanied posting in the 5 years prior to interview OR
 - the spouse of a former serving member of the UK Armed Forces who had left Service in the 5 years prior to interview and had at least one accompanied posting in the 5 years before personnel left Service
- A total of 19 telephone interviews were conducted with:
 - 11 spouses of officers, 8 of NCO ranked personnel (Sergeant or above)
 - 14 spouses affiliated with the British Army, 5 with the Royal Air Force
 - 6 spouses who had experienced transition out of the military community
- All participants were female and married – further details are shown in Table 1
- Spouses/partners were asked about the impact of accompanied postings on their relationships with other spouses within the military community, non-military friends, civilians and wider family members (siblings, parents etc.)
- Spouse/partner perceptions of how these experiences influenced their well-being were explored – this was determined by spouse descriptions of positive or negative emotional responses to their experiences at the time, in accordance with the two continuum model of health and well-being theory [23] and *a priori* themes of identity, incorporation and agency [24-27]
- Data were analysed using Framework analysis, a method for organising and identifying themes and sub-themes within qualitative data [28-30]
- Differences in spouse perceptions and experiences were explored by rank (officer/non-officer), Service (Army/RAF) and serving status (currently serving/left Service) and are discussed where relevant
- Ethical approval was granted by the King's College Hospital Research Ethics Committee (NHS REC reference: 08/H0808/27)
- Findings were second-coded to ensure accuracy (AV)

¹ Further information in: Gribble, R. (2017). *What's it like to have a partner in the UK Armed Forces? Influences on the mental health and well-being of women*. Degree of Doctor of Philosophy, King's College London.

SPOUSE EXPERIENCES OF SOCIAL CONNECTIONS DURING ACCOMPANIED POSTINGS

EFFECTS ON SOCIAL CONNECTIONS WITH OTHER SPOUSES, NON-MILITARY FRIENDS AND CIVILIANS

SUPPORT

The perceived benefits of life within the military community were clear from participant descriptions of the practical and emotional support they received from other spouses. This was reported to help mitigate some of the difficulties participants faced as a result of being posted far away from wider family networks by providing the support spouses would have had if living near relatives.

"... [it was] a strong knit little community... everyone was really helpful... people would just be there to help you and it was great. And that was fantastic support." Gina, 40s (NCO, RAF)

"... you develop quite good networks at supporting each other because we've never lived by our family. I've never had a grandma in the same town to help or sisters or brothers. My family's scattered all over the country." Kristen, 50s (officer, Army, transitioned)

BUILDING SOCIAL NETWORKS

Most spouses reported minimal difficulties meeting other spouses following an accompanied posting, with some describing easily forming new friendships within the military community. This was more commonly reported by spouses of officers, possibly as they had previously experienced prior moves away from home for university or work and therefore had more experience in quickly rebuilding social networks.

"... like attracts like really... I'm quite happy to chat... I think that's half of it, just talking to people. And then you just naturally drift in with friends..." Suzy, 40s (officer, Army)

The ease or difficulty with which spouses were able to meet people following accompanied postings seemed to be influenced by their personality. Spouses who were more out-going found this to be a benefit in building new connections while those with more introverted personalities had less opportunities for meeting people.

TABLE 1: DETAILS OF PARTICIPANTS

Service personnel rank	Spouse age group (years)	Pseudonym	Personnel Service branch	Service Personnel transitioned?	No. of years married	Total no. of accompanied postings	Overseas accompanied postings?	Spouse occupational area
NCO	30s	Courtney	RAF	No	5-9	<5	Yes	Teacher
		Mary	Army	Yes	10-14	<5	Yes	Health services
		Allison	Army	No	10-14	5-9	Yes	Educational support
		Dee	Army	No	15-19	5-9	Yes	Educational support
	40s	Molly	Army	No	5-9	<5	No	Educational support
		Gina	RAF	No	10-14	<5	Yes	Teacher
		Janet	Army	Yes	15-19	<5	Yes	Health services
		Linda	Army	Yes	20+	5-9	Yes	Stay at home parent
Officer	30s	Jennifer	Army	No	10-14	5-9	No	Educational support
		Louise	RAF	Yes	10-14	5-9	No	Self-employed
	40s	Toni	RAF	No	10-14	<5	No	Teacher
		Anna	Army	No	10-14	5-9	No	Health services
		Joan	Army	No	15-19	5-9	Yes	Health services
		Kathleen	Army	No	20+	5-9	Yes	Stay at home parent
		Kim	Army	No	20+	5-9	Yes	Military charity
		Suzy	Army	No	20+	10+	Yes	Financial services
	50s	Carrie	Army	Yes	20+	5-9	Yes	Self-employed
		Kristen	Army	Yes	20+	10+	Yes	Educational support
		Melissa	RAF	No	20+	10+	Yes	Correctional services

“... one of my friends here says “Oh [Kristen], within twenty minutes you know everyone’s life history!” I’m very good at kind of getting to know people and sussing out people whose company I like and I’m quite intuitive “Oh, yes I’m going to like her, I’ll spend more time with her!”...” Kristen, 50s (officer, Army, transitioned)

“... I’m not a person to go “Oh hi, I’m so and so and I’ve just moved in”! I’m not like that. I wouldn’t go and knock on people’s houses and introduce myself...” Allison, 30s (NCO, Army)

The commonalities of life within military bases were reported to make it easier to find spouses with comparable experiences, background or interests. With many other families around, participants, especially those with young children, were easily able to find others in a similar situation.

“... what you naturally do as a mother, when your children are small, is go to groups and take your children to playgroups. And you meet people that way, that’s really natural and really easy.” Courtney, 30s (NCO, RAF)

“... all the way through [husband]’s Army time you just knew on an Army patch... the people next door were similar age, the woman probably wasn’t working, they probably had children and there were loads of people to go and knock on the door and have tea with.” Kristen, 50s (officer, Army, transitioned)

Participants described how social activities were routinely provided for them via informal spouse-led events on base that built on these common aspects of military family life. The majority of these events were reported to be mother and toddler groups, coffee mornings or wives clubs and were not always perceived as of interest or value. Some participants described how the focus on certain social activities could limit the ways in which spouses were able to meet and connect.

“... I guess I’m not the kind of person that wants to sit around and chat about last night’s telly or the housework and what I’m going to cook for tea tonight...” Joan, 40s (officer, Army)

“If you don’t have small children at the gate going to school, that cuts down who you’re meeting. If you’re not an avid churchgoer, that cuts down who you’re meeting. And when you’re not in work, that cuts down who you’re meeting.” Melissa, 50s (officer, RAF)

Other commonalities of military were also reported to provide a framework for social connections between spouses. Participants discussed how the regimental structure of the military allowed social connections to be created and maintained across multiple postings, while those who did not move as part of a regiment had to recreate their social networks at each new location.

“I’ve been very fortunate because my husband’s infantry. So quite often the whole regiment moves round together... a lot of my time I would be in one location and we’d all move together... you know a number of the people for years.” Kim, 40s (officer, Army)

"... my husbands' in the Corps so we don't all go as a regiment... he gets posted as an individual. So you haven't got a ready-made network when you arrive... you don't know people." Suzy, 40s (officer, Army)

The hierarchical nature of the military rank system also provided a framework, although a more restrictive one. Participants described how they tended to associate with spouses married to Service personnel of a similar rank, replicating the military hierarchy through their own friendships within the wider military community.

"...I think there is still a division between officer's wives and... soldier's wives mixing... it doesn't happen very often... there is still that division." Anna, 40s (officer, Army)

Spouses also discussed social connections with people outside the military community. Some described the important role civilian friends had in providing friendship and support throughout their husband's Service despite the distances involved in accompanied postings.

"I've got a really strong friendship group with the girls that I went to school with... and we're all still really good friends..." Mary, 30s (NCO, Army, transitioned)

"I had my old school friends and they were constants, I didn't keep up with them all the time, but I'd see who I wanted to see when I came back to the UK or when I was able..." Carrie, 50s (officer, Army, transitioned)

Although not discussed by many participants, the quality of relationships with civilians appeared to be depend how whether spouses felt colleagues were unable to comprehend the realities of being the wife of someone in the military.

"...you might be in employment here and people just wouldn't understand how you felt with your husband being away. And they'll go "Oh not long now, he'll be home in eight weeks" or ten weeks and you think 'You haven't got an igloo!'" Kim, 40s (officer, Army)

Wherever they sought to create social connections, accompanied postings were reported to limit the time they had available in an area to build close and meaningful relationships before another move. As a result, friendships could be described as casual acquaintances rather than meaningful connections.

"I'd like to have quality friendships. Obviously when you move around a lot... I'd like to have local quality friendships and obviously they take time to build up." Molly, 40s (NCO, Army)

"There's a lot of surface friendships [within the military community], a lot of socialising on the surface... I have met a handful of really nice people that I would stay friends with for a long time..." Gina, 40s (NCO, RAF)

EFFECTS ON SOCIAL CONNECTIONS WITH WIDER FAMILY

Accompanied postings could result in spouses living at great distances from their parents, siblings and other relatives. This was reported to bring some participants closer to their families while others describing a lack of interaction that caused families to drift apart.

"...certainly with my mum and dad, its brought me closer to them cause I think you find when you do see them it's sort of precious time really. When you're with people all the time you sort of take it for granted... we look forward to when the next time we're going to see each other." Allison, 30s (NCO, Army)

"...because they're not immediate and we're away... relationships do suffer. There isn't... as much contact..." Gina, 40s (NCO, RAF)

For spouses, the distance from family could act as a barrier to accessing or providing emotional and practical support, especially during times of illnesses or bereavement. This was more commonly discussed by spouses of NCO ranked personnel, who were less likely to report previously living away from home and therefore more reliant on family support.

"... my son was ill when I [had medical problem]... I could have really done with my family there! Because my mum would have come straight over and taken him and looked after him." Courtney, 30s (NCO, RAF)

"I've missed some funerals because we're in the military... I was [posted] when two of my [relatives] died... and my youngest was upset because his father was away. So there was no way I could go...." Toni, 40s (officer, RAF)

Other family relationships could also be affected by the distances involved in accompanied postings. Some participants explained how the relationship between their children and grandparents could suffer because of the lack of frequent contact and described making a lot of effort to maintain these connections. This was more commonly discussed by spouses of officers who are likely to be in a better position financially to regularly travel to see family.

"... when my older [child], obviously only seeing [grandmother] and [granddad] a few days every few months was you know much more reserved... it took him longer to become comfortable" Louise, 30s (officer, RAF, transitioned)

"...as a military family you end up trugging all over the country and making sure that you maintain those links with grandparents... [husband's parents are]... I guess less willing to travel so we have to go and see them more...." Joan, 40s (officer, Army)

THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL CONNECTIONS DURING ACCOMPANIED POSTINGS ON WELL-BEING

Two major themes were identified illustrating how spouse well-being was influenced by experiences of social connections during accompanied postings (Figure 1): connectedness and identity.

CONNECTEDNESS

Spouses described the connectedness they experienced through their relationships with other spouses, non-military friends, civilians and family members outside of the military community and how this was affected by accompanied postings. This theme was comprised on three sub-themes: *support and belonging*, *grief and loss* and *isolation and disconnection*.

SUPPORT AND BELONGING

The mutual support and understanding of military life that participants received from other spouses within the military community was reported to build community cohesion, creating a sense of connection and belonging.

"...when you're on your patch it's a lot easier and because everyone's in the same situation, everyone else knows what it's like to have your husband away all the time. And that sort of brings you closer together..." Jennifer, 30s (officer, Army)

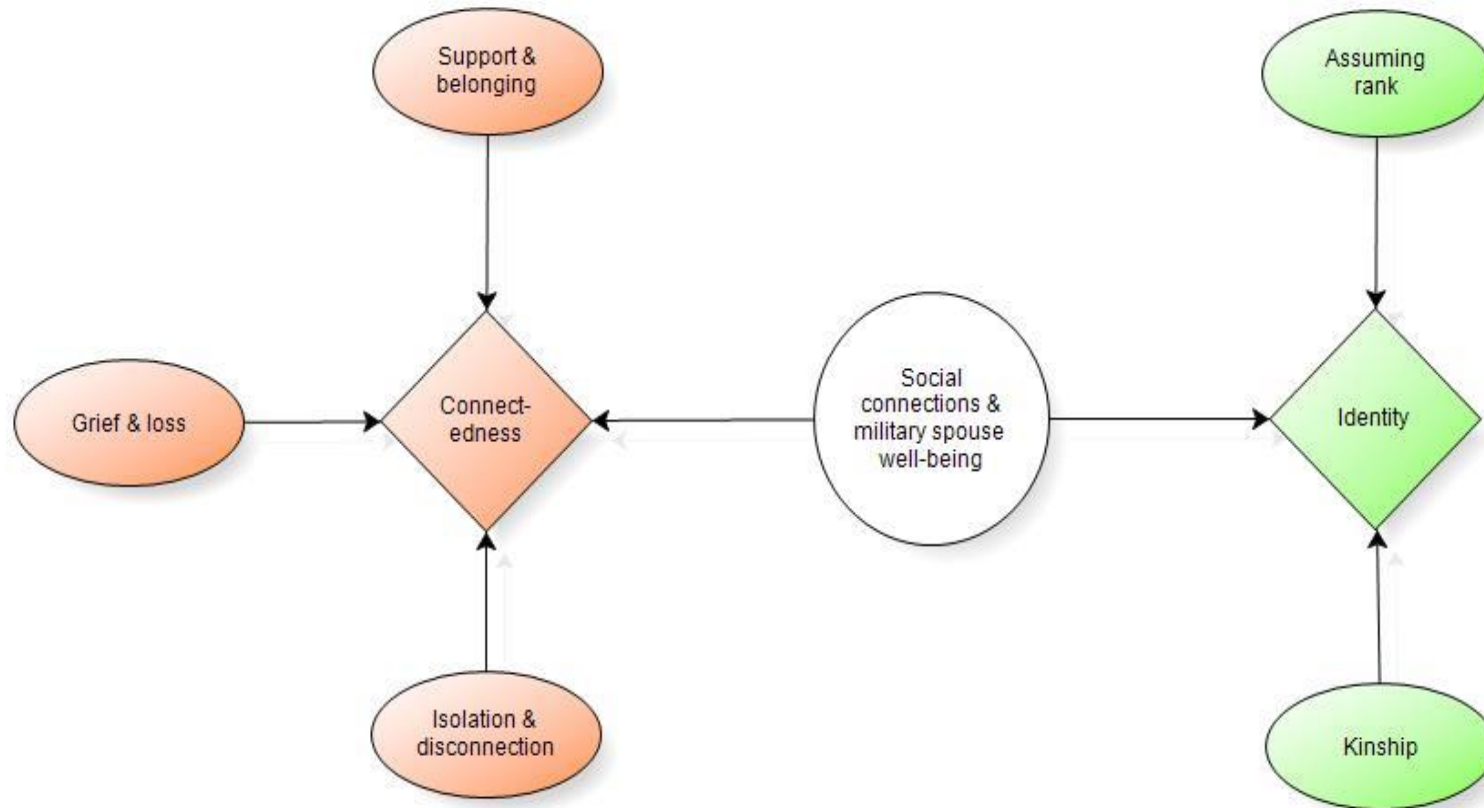
"... [on RAF base] although it can be in some ways quite claustrophobic, people are quick to come around and say hello and get to know you because you're all in the same boat... you're not going to be there for very long so you make an effort." Louise, 30s (officer, RAF, transitioned)



As previously described, regiments and rank hierarchies provided pre-defined positions for spouses within the military community. While this could be restrictive, these systems could were also described as a benefit to spouses as they had access to established support networks and a "place" within the community across and between postings.

"... if you're moving into a regiment then they do have people on the lookout for you. And in some ways it's easier because you've got a ready-made community which you know you will have a part in already whether you like it or not, because of 'who you are'!" Suzy, 40s (officer, Army)

While all participants were aware of the informal support available from within the community, some were reluctant to seek this out as they did not want to be seen as taking advantage or burdening others. One participant described how she had taken on the stoic

FIGURE 1: THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL CONNECTIONS DURING ACCOMPANIED POSTINGS ON WELL-BEING



Key:  Major theme  Minor theme

nature of the Army and was concerned about how she might be seen if she did ask for support.

“... you don’t want to [ask for support] and you feel really bad, but they’re sort of like “No, no, no, don’t be so silly, don’t be so silly”... you always feel guilty about it, but everybody feels that way... we don’t like to take advantage of people’s kindness...” Jennifer, 30s (officer, Army)

“...there’s a big thing in the Army about manning up so you don’t really like to [ask for help]...I didn’t like to give out that weakness I suppose... I’m a strong person. I wouldn’t want people to think I was weak maybe or that I was struggling...” Mary, 30s (NCO, Army, transitioned)

GRIEF AND LOSS

The frequency of accompanied postings meant regularly leaving the supportive relationships spouses had built with others in the military community. Because of the sense of belonging these friendships provided, some spouses felt a sense of loss and separation when required to leave them behind.

“... there’s a security in [specific] friendships as well that is hard to let go of... you kind of know your place, you know that you’re accepted... the grief thing is it’s a kind of letting go... being sad about the fact that I’m not going to see these people on a regular basis anymore, that I’m not going to be able to share in their... lives anymore.” Kathleen, 40s (officer, Army)

Because of the frequency of moves, spouses found various ways of resolving the loss of social connections. Some reported how they managed these emotions by accepting them as part and parcel of their life as a military “wife” and an additional duty they were required to perform because of their husband’s occupation.

“... it’s really sort of like your job in a way where you’ve got to say goodbye to... people that you’ve had as friends and relied on and they are your family really cause you help each other out... it is hard because you’ve spent all that time with them and been there for them through maybe some not very nice things or emotional times and things like that. And then you’ve got to leave them....” Allison, 30s (NCO, Army)

ISOLATION AND DISCONNECTION

Where some spouses encountered support and belonging within the military community, others experienced the opposite. The difficulties some spouses reported in accessing support were

described as contributing to feelings of vulnerability and isolation if they were unable to quickly rebuild social networks following an accompanied posting because of more reserved personalities.

“...I’m not really a neighbourer so I wouldn’t go in into [neighbours] house and sit chatting... that wasn’t really my thing... I remember going to the bus stop in the morning to drop the children off... I would walk back into the flat and I’d think... I’m on my own here all day... oh I used to feel really lonely then.” Janet, 40s (NCO, Army, transitioned)

Some spouses expressed concern about accessing emotional and practical support from family members as a result of the distances involved in accompanied postings. Participants who were unable to access their family for support because of postings described feelings from sadness and separation to attributing poor mental health outcomes to a lack of appropriate family support during times of additional need.

“...As much as you talk on the phone and things it’s not the same as in person. So it’s that can be hard. And you know if you’re feeling down that day and not having your mum around the corner or your sisters...” Allison, 30s (NCO, Army)

“... I didn’t have any family in the area of course when I’d had [postnatal depression]... I’d had no support... that was quite hard... it did affect my well-being definitely at that point.” Gina, 40s (NCO, RAF)

While the community provided social activities to assist spouses with building new social connections following postings and to alleviate feelings of isolation, not all participants found such events to be inclusive or welcoming. Although discussed by only a few participants, some encountered cliques at these events, with implications for how welcoming spouses viewed the military community to be.

“... lots of Army wives are young, ... I don’t think they realise the impact them not talking to... the new person has on the new person. I think [they] sit in [their]... secure little shell in that ‘I’m ok, I’ve got my friends in this little group here. I don’t need to go and talk to that person over there’.” Molly, 40s (NCO, Army)

Some of the isolation experienced by participants arose from perceived restrictions to joining social activities that were intended to help spouses interact and access support from within the military community. Those who felt unable to participate explained how they could not contribute to, or interact with, the community in the same way as those who could attend, leading to feelings of exclusion and marginalisation.

“... it was hard in our first posting. Cause I didn’t have children and all the people around me did, and I was at work all the time, and so I never really saw anyone. And I couldn’t... I didn’t really have any conversation that was relevant... I felt quite excluded.” Toni, 40s (officer, RAF)

Isolation and disconnection were also evident in spouses experiences of friendship and family networks during accompanied postings. Fears about missing out on the daily life or special occasions of non-military friends and family members led to feelings of jealousy and envy among some spouses. If not managed, such negative emotions could potentially damage key relationships that spouses rely on for support.

“...I always felt I was missing out [with friends]...on special occasions and day to day lives... you’re kind of out of sight, out of mind a bit... Jealous really that they were still all able to get on with you know things as they had always been.” Mary, 30s (NCO, Army, transitioned)

“...I feel as though I’ve missed out a bit with me mum... loads of time when I was away and stuff and she’d say “Oh me and your sister are going shopping with the children” I’d felt like I were missing out... Oh I wish I were with them.” Janet, 40s (NCO, Army, transitioned)

The sense of disconnection was elevated for participants who perceived their family did not fully understand their situation as a military family and therefore the importance of maintaining contact. This perceived lack of understanding created a perception of separation and estrangement between spouses and their family networks.

“...you get put into a compartment in their head where you know it’s just another move... [they think] we’re used to it so therefore we [are] really strong and can cope... it’s almost a little bit of out of sight, out of mind ... without the regular contact you are a bit estranged really. As a military family you feel a bit estranged.” Gina, 40s (NCO, RAF)

These issues with perceived exclusion could persist after families left Service. Spouses described adjusting to living amongst ‘civilians’ again and adapting to cultural differences that were seen to make building connections more difficult, even some years after leaving Service.

“... there is definitely a certain culture amongst Army wives. Which sounds really cliquey and horrible, but there is a certain something about it. I don’t know whether it’s the humour, whether it’s the independence or what it is, but I have not found it with people here. And I’m not quite sure how to.” Carrie, 50s (officer, Army, transitioned)

IDENTITY

Spouses discussed how they were assigned a social position similar to their husband's rank within the community. The imposition of this military identity on civilians modified the sense of connectedness and belonging participants encountered from the military community, with suspicions expressed about the sincerity and motives of some spouses. The distances involved in accompanied postings prevented spouses from fulfilling their roles as daughters, sisters or aunts within wider family networks, resulting in guilt, stress and a lack of support during key life events. This theme was comprised on two sub-themes: *assuming rank* and *kinship*.

ASSUMING RANK

Spouses, especially those of officer and higher ranked non-officers with some degree of responsibility over other personnel, explained how they became "ranked" within the military community, with a similar standing assigned to them as to their husband. This could result in differences in the perceived social power between spouses according to these assigned positions, with some participants reporting that they were treated differently because of who their husband was.

"...it is this bizarre kind of artificial world where your husband... he has quite a lot of control over the men and women... and therefore as the partner you live in this very bizarre world where everyone becomes really lovely towards you! And you're the funniest person ever to have existed for those two years and everybody wants to be your friend." Anna, 40s (officer, Army)

Some spouses described how they felt there was an overemphasis within the community on their husband's rank. This left some feeling that their value to others was only because of this assigned identity, rather than on their value as an independent person.

"... people were not friendly. People are more interested in what your husband's rank is, rather than you know who you are as a person...people would say you know 'Oh where does your husband work?'... what rank he is... that really doesn't matter." Dee, 30s (NCO, Army)

Some participants explained how because of these differences they came to view expressions of friendship from other spouses with suspicion. Spouses who believed others were only interested in furthering their own husband's career rather than any interest in them as a person reported how they became wary of accepting overtures of friendliness. One described how she opted to self-exclude from the community to avoid replicating the military hierarchy through her social connections and passively resist the imposition of this identity.

“...we just become more wary of people maybe. A bit more distrusting and a lot of people want to be friends with you because of who your husband [is]... their first question is “What rank is your husband?”... it’s kind of how they can use you to their advantage and if your husband’s going to help their husband out, and you know like promotion wise...” Mary, 30s (NCO, Army, transitioned)

“... there was this element of hierarchy within the group that was reflected by the husband’s ranking which I didn’t think was really relevant or appropriate... because of [that I had] a select number of people that I would socialise with on an occasional basis and then the rest of it was done off camp.” Louise, 30s (officer, RAF, transitioned)

KINSHIP

Spouses discussed the tensions they experienced in balancing multiple identities as mothers, (military) wives and family members and how this could affect their ability to perform roles within family networks. Participants explained the importance of not only receiving but giving support within their family networks despite the distances created by accompanied postings. However, attempting to balance the demands of their own lives with those of competing family roles while at a distance was reported to be stressful for some participants.

“...you want to be there for people [if somebody’s ill], but you can’t. Or you have to sort of you know try and work around when is the best time to go down and see people ... that is a bit stressful.” Jennifer, 30s (officer, Army)

An extreme example of this tension was given; while posted overseas, one of Kristen’s parents died shortly after she gave birth and because of this, she was unable to fly home for the funeral. She explained how this meant she was without support from her family but also unable to provide support to her family because of her new role as a mother.

“... it was a terrible dilemma because of course I was meant to go back for [their] funeral, but I couldn’t cause I had a new born baby and it was a really difficult time... I just had [husband] and a supportive family back in the UK, but I wasn’t really in a position to have their practical help.” Kristen, 50s (officer, Army, transitioned)

These tensions between competing roles were further stretched when spouses anticipated future caring roles. Participants who discussed assuming caring responsibilities for elderly relatives were unsure how they would manage this along with accompanied postings and within current military policies and procedures.

“...we’re conscious we’re entering the era of parents that ... might need looking after... it’s alright at the minute, but you know it could be coming up for us and how we’d manage that with us being posted away... it’s just something you know is sitting on your shoulder, you’re thinking about it for the future when you move.” Suzy, 40s (officer, Army)

DISCUSSION

These findings suggest the presence of the military community provided spouses with access to, and membership of, an important social group where they could obtain support as well a sense of belonging. Some participants experienced isolation and disconnection because of more reserved personalities or perceived restrictions on ways to meet other spouses in the community, some of which were related to being assigned the rank and social position of their husband. The distances involved in accompanied postings could cause tensions in balancing multiple identities as mothers, (military) wives and family members, leading to disconnection from friends and family and a reduction in reciprocal support.

The presence of the community is clearly important to military families, with 74% of Service personnel and spouses reporting that being part of the community was what they liked most about living in Service family accommodation [31]. Perceptions of support were evident among participants, and most discussed how the military community provided both practical and emotional support and understanding about military life. For many participants, this support contributed to a sense of cohesion and belonging, which are associated with not only increased feelings of empowerment and psychological well-being and mental health among spouses and improving retention of Service personnel [12-15, 32-37]. This was more commonly described by spouses of officers for whom such relationships seemed more important, although there was a mix of across the sample. Because of the depth of the connections formed within the community, spouses could experience grief and loss when leaving these friendships, particularly when they were considered as an alternative or surrogate for family networks. While similar descriptions of loss and mourning regarding social connections have been reflected in studies of UK spouses posted overseas [24, 38], this was not a common theme in this study, possibly as most spouses had experienced three or more postings.

Perceptions of support and belonging among spouses varied according to their personality, the perceived depth of friendships, family structure and regimental and rank systems. Military life does not suit all spouses, some of whom can find the insecurity of short-term relationships isolating [39] because of the difficulties in building and maintaining good quality and supportive relationships [24, 26, 40, 41]. Spouses with more reserved personalities described the isolation and loneliness of military life despite being surrounded by the military community. Others explained how they felt some of the friendships they developed were based on proximity rather

than meaningful connections while cliques within the community led some to feel excluded, affecting how they came to view the military community itself. Such participants may be at greater risk of social isolation, stress, psychological distress and mental health problems [1, 2, 41-46]. Perceptions of disconnection from the military community have also been associated with greater family problems associated with accompanied postings among US Army spouses/partners [47].

One issue raised by many of the participants was the focus of many social activities within the community on parents with young children. Although these were intended to provide a ways by which spouses could meet and provide support, some participants were unable to attend as they worked, did not have children at that time or they did not feel they would fit in, leading to feelings of exclusion. The social support spouses receive through their role as a mother has been associated with significantly lower deployment related stress among those with children compared to those without [48]. Having children may provide spouses with greater access to emotional support within the community, helping to alleviate some of the frustrations with military life. While support for this group remains important, social activities should be updated to be more inclusive of modern families as well as more traditional family structures. An additional issue raised by participants was uncertainty about taking on additional caring roles for elderly relatives while living within military accommodation. Although not usually considered in military families research, this may become increasingly important among the military community and consideration may need to be given to how families might be able to fulfil these roles given that failure to do so has been associated with increased depression [49].

The rank and regimental systems of the military were reported to provide pre-determined social networks for spouses, allowing social connections to be maintained between postings. While the extent to which Service personnel rank is extended to spouses has changed over time, it still remains a key part of organising the military community [8, 25, 50-52] and this was clear within the descriptions given of building relationships with other spouses. Some participants described how assuming a similar position to Service personnel within the military hierarchy restricted the social connections they were able to make with other spouses, either through social division within the community along officer-non-officer lines or because of suspicion and distrust some spouses had towards those hoping to establish connections that could advance their husband's career. In either situation, the social networks of spouses could become limited, with such spouses potentially missing out on military-specific support during times of greater stress such as deployment or separation from Service personnel. However, there can also be benefits for spouses from this identity. Higher social support has been reported among spouses of officers compared to spouses of lower ranked personnel [53], possibly because of the expectations they face to perform certain roles in the community because of their husband's position in the military hierarchy [24, 54-56].

While support provided by from family and friends is associated with the psychological well-being of spouses [20, 21], much of the research has focused on support from within the military community. It is clear from these findings that it is also important for spouses to maintain these connections during accompanied postings in order to protect well-being among this population. The distances that accompanied postings introduced into relationships with friendship groups and family members could benefit these connections but also test them. Jealousy and envy from spouses who felt they were missing out on the lives of friends and family could harm friendships if not managed, while balancing their roles as mothers and wives against roles within family networks could cause tension and stress as well as introducing a barrier to reciprocal support during times of crises.

Spouses living outside the military community, either through choice, unaccompanied postings or transition, also described feelings of disconnection and separation. These arose from perceived cultural differences between military and civilian communities, similar to the lack of connection with civilians discussed in previous research of spouses undergoing unaccompanied postings [57]. Such experiences are of particular significance to the proposed Future Accommodation Model (FAM), which suggests changes to the provision of Service family accommodation (SFA) including greater home ownership and increased private rental agreements within civilian areas.² There may be benefits for some spouses from this policy. A small number of participants described how they preferred living off base as they were able to avoid the identities and roles imposed upon them from within the community and maintain a sense of their independence from their husband's occupation. For these spouses, the increased perception of agency that FAM may bestow on some families may contribute to greater well-being. However, these perceptions were not common, with most participants opting to seek informal support from within the military community because of the understanding and support available from other spouses. There may be implications not only for the well-being of spouses but for military families if a perceived lack of engagement with civilians and reduced access to informal support from other military spouses or partners becomes the norm following the introduction of FAM.

STRENGTHS

- This is one of the few UK studies to explore social connections among UK military spouses and the first to focus on connections within the military community as well as wider social networks of non-military friends, civilians and family members
- While other studies of the influence of accompanied postings on the well-being of military spouses have been conducted, these have focused on overseas postings only; this study explored social connections during accompanied postings overseas and in the UK

² Further information at www.gov.uk/government/collections/mod-future-accommodation-model

- Differences in social connections were explored according to Service personnel rank to investigate if and how the military hierarchy plays a role in relationships within a modern military community
- Feedback on the interview questions and findings was provided by representatives of the Army Families Federation to ensure they were relevant to military spouses in the UK and interpreted in light of the national policy context

LIMITATIONS

- Spouses/partners were recruited into the original study via Service personnel, which may have influenced who took part in the original Children of Military Father's study
- Participants were all female spouses of Army and RAF Service personnel of officer and senior non-commissioned officer (NCO) rank; findings may not reflect the experiences of other groups of spouses

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Given the importance of the military community in terms of support for spouses, the proposed Future Accommodation Model (FAM) should be evaluated to determine the impact on military families and potentially pre-empt some of the issues that spouses may experience as a result of the geographical dispersion of the military community
- Organisers of social activities for spouses should consider how the changing roles of women in society might influence the ability of some spouses to participate in these events and introduce alternative opportunities for spouses to interact
- Additional ways to improve spouse access to the military community should be explored for those unable to access the community within military bases, such as online forums or events held within the civilian community where they may be easier to attend
- Challenging the imposition of Service personnel rank on spouses would allow freer association within the military community, widening and deepen social connections and improve access to informal support

FUTURE RESEARCH

- Future studies should focus on the social connection experiences in groups not represented in this study, especially spouses of lower ranked or Royal Navy personnel

- Similar issues should also be explored among male spouses of Service personnel to understand their experiences of the military community and how these may differ from female spouses, particularly during deployments when additional support may be required
- If introduced, future research should include an evaluation of FAM and its effect on the well-being of military spouses and families adjusting to living outside the military community

CONCLUSIONS

Most spouses reported minimal difficulties meeting other spouses but some encountered problems building social connections within the military community, largely related to their personalities or family circumstances. Life within the military community, the regimental and rank structure of the military and social activities arranged for spouses were important ways of building social connections for spouses. However, these were not always accessible and could limit the connections spouses were able to form. Physical distance from family members could strengthen or weaken family networks.

The presence of other military families provided spouses with access to, and membership of, an important social group where they could obtain support as well a sense of belonging. However, some spouses experienced isolation and disconnection because of perceived limitations on avenues into the community, some of which stemmed from assuming the rank and position of their husband. Disconnection from friends and family because of separations related to accompanied postings could lead to difficulties in balancing multiple identities as mothers, (military) wives and family members, preventing spouses from fulfilling kinship roles.

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