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Disruptions in the Experiences of First-Time Military Family Members

by

Ana C. Vidal

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts
Department of Communication
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Florida

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DEDICATION

To all the military family members willing to share their stories and experiences with me. I am forever and wholeheartedly thankful for your patience and grace with my many questions, for sharing your laughs, anger, worries, and tears, and for letting me become a very small part of your military family.

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This thesis is the collective effort of many. First, to the 12 research participants who were interviewed and gave their words for this project, I am truly grateful for allowing me to see into your stories and families. You have changed the way I view my own experience with the military and how I understand familial support. I also want to acknowledge the few service members and military family members who reached out to me but did not qualify for this study and were still willing to speak with me about their experiences in an informal conversation.

To my committee: Thank you. These two words do not adequately encompass the emotions I would like to express, but they are what I have. Thank you for your fortifying support, your knowledge and feedback that made me question my assumptions and pushed me farther than I could ever go by myself, and your time and labor on a project that concluded outside of the school year and your university obligations. Steve, my advisor and mentor for far longer than I have been a graduate student, thank you for giving me a chance to work on projects that, as an undergraduate student, I would have not thought myself worthy to collaborate on, and have led to where I am today. Thank you for having faith when I stumbled and being a source of vast knowledge and support through research, classes, and academia. Ambar, thank you for being a huge part of how I view communication today, and for teaching me to look for the untold/unknown stories and underappreciated voices in our society. Thank you for your kindness both in answering my many questions in the classroom and after, as well as for the tangerines you had for students who needed a pick-me-up after a rough day. Sonia, without your class, this

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ABSTRACT

Military service members and their families encounter many obstacles throughout their time in the military (as well as before enlistment/commission and after service), ranging from those unique to the military community to those common within civilian families. Although how military families deal with these challenges/stressors and how to better support these families has been a salient research area, there is still room for expansion of knowledge. This study argues for expanding who is included in the definition of a "military family" to include a service member's parents/parental figures and siblings, as well as enlarging the period of interest in military service of academia to include when service members first enter the military. In particular, this study focuses on the experiences and disruptions of military service members' family members, specifically those families who have no prior experience with the military before one of their members joins (coined "first-time military family member"). Utilizing the framework of Buzzanell's (2010) communication theory of resilience and Braun et al. (2019) reflexive thematic analysis, this study delves into how first-time military family members are affected by their SM's military service and deepens how we see resilience constructed and enacted. Through 12 in-depth interviews of participants who had no generational or functional knowledge of the military before one of their family members joined, this study seeks to examine how first-time military family members' lives may be emotionally, physically, and/or financially disrupted when they have no prior experience with military life and to understand how first-time military families (struggle to) enact resilience having no previous experience with the military. Findings

demonstrate that due to an information deficit (not understanding why their family member joined, not knowing who to ask for information, what terms to use to ask for support or connect with others, or what to expect during certain periods in their family member's military service) and material disruptions, first-time military families reject military identities and use processes established before their family member's service to cope with military life.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO STUDY AND RESEARCH CONTEXT

Blue Tennis Shoes on Yellow Footprints: A Personal Narrative of a Daughter and United States Marine

You are 17 years old. You grew up in Miami, Florida, the only child of two immigrants from Venezuela. You spend your childhood playing out adventures, imagining yourself as a part of the books you are always reading. You find yourself drawn to certain books over others, stories about war that feature the United States Marines. At 11 years old, this strikes you as odd, because no one in your family is in the military (United States or Venezuelan) and you are a stereotypical "nerd" instead of an athlete or leader. You don't fit the mold, and no one would expect it from you, so your interest in the military becomes your little secret. It might not make sense to anyone else, but you become invested in the idea of a found family that is willing to die for you – a loyalty that you feel is lacking in your own blood family where every couple is divorced or no longer speaks to one another. At 15 years old, you submit your information to the Marines and get a letter back saying you are too young – to come back when you're 17 and have graduated high school. You tuck the letter underneath your pillow for a few days, feeling like you *finally* have a tangible connection to the group you feel a kinship with.

You are 17 years old. You get a phone call from a Marine recruiter, and less than a month later, you find yourself enlisted in the United States Marine Corps. You have to graduate high school before shipping out to Marine boot camp, so you have 6 months to get in shape. Your parents are still confused and worried about how their quiet baby girl is supposed to survive in a

male-dominated world of aggression and violence. Your mother worries about you dying as much as she doubts whether you could kill someone in combat or deal with the emotional repercussions that follow. Your father is dumbfounded you are throwing away a 40-thousand-dollar scholarship for a good school to instead join a world of weapons and chaos. Neither of them understands your decision, nor do your friends, nor your extended family in Venezuela and Spain, and you feel alone. You know that they have faith in you as a person, to survive in the civilian world, but you also know they don't think you'll make it through becoming a Marine. Your parents sign the consent forms to let you enlist underage anyway.

You are 17 years old. You go to the enlisting center to get medically tested and approved by the government. In a cold, bright, sterile hallway outside the doctors' offices, surrounded by other teenagers waiting their turns, a Navy Corpsmen takes a look at your file, then at your testing score, then at you – and asks incredulously, like he needs to make sure his eyes aren't deceiving him, "What branch are you joining?"[1] You swallow and stammer out, "The Marine Corps, sir." You understand his confusion, between how you look physically – a slight, Hispanic, 5'4" girl who looks at the floor more than she does at people's faces when they speak to her – and how your test scores show you to be in the 97th percentile of applicants. He stares at you for 15 seconds, then asks without needing an answer, "So you're an idiot?" You wonder if you might be the only person on the planet who thinks it's a good idea for you to join the Marines.

You are 17 years old. You graduated from high school a week ago. It's 4 a.m. and you're standing outside a recruiting office, in the dark, saying goodbye to your parents.

You are 17 years old. You get on a plane to South Carolina, where boot camp awaits you on the infamous Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island. It's your first time on a plane without

[1] A Navy Corpsmen is a medic that is trained by the Navy.

your family, but you're surrounded by other hopeful and nervous young adults – you are all called recruits now – who are supposed to be your new family.

You are 17 years old. You board a bus after spending the night at the airport and get told to put your head down and not speak until given commands to do otherwise. You feel the bus rumbling beneath you, making turns down streets you've never been on. Your heart hammers in your chest and you hold the silence around you like a blanket to ground you.

You are 17 years old. The bus stops. Heavy boots march up the bus steps and a deep voice yells out, "All of you look at me right now!"

You are 17 years old. You run out of the bus following other young women and line up on a grid of yellow footprints. Your blue tennis shoes don't fill up the footprints you are stepping on, and you wonder if you are woman enough to fill the boots – and the legacy – of all the Marines who came before you.

You are 17 years old. You are told to make a phone call home informing your family that you have safely arrived at Marine Corps boot camp. Before you can do so, you are informed that there is a script attached to the landline you will be calling from and that no deviations from said script will be tolerated. You step into the line that forms behind the phones, Drill Instructors yelling at recruits to speak the script "Faster, faster!" and you know that this will be the last time in three months you will hear your mother's voice and she will hear yours. You don't know what time it is, and your only hope is that she answers the call from an unknown number. You step up to the phone, dial, hear a groggy, "Alo?" and quickly and robotically regurgitate the script written in front of you on a piece of paper worn by time and fingers before hanging up the phone. As you hurriedly walk away, you wish you could have said "I love you" or "I'm sorry for putting you through this, Mama, but I need to do this for me." You'll tell her one day, but not today.

You are 17 years old. You wonder what you've gotten yourself and your family into.

You are 18 years old. You are still at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island, but you are now a Marine. You finished the Crucible and earned your Eagle, Globe, and Anchor a week ago.[2] You stand in formation, perfectly at attention, in front of a gaggle of families and friends who haven't seen their loved ones in three months. This is the moment. You are about to see your family. You wonder if they already see you. You know they miss you from the letters you get from them every week. All you want in the world is a hug from your mother.

You are 18 years old. You hear a clear and booming, "Dismissed!" and relax for a moment before looking for your family. You see hugs and tears and hear laughs of relief all around you. You feel arms close around you – your mother's arms – hear her voice in your ear, and for the first time in three months, you remember what it feels like to be safe and loved. For the first time in three months, you allow tears to fall from your eyes as you embrace your family. You tell them that you love them, in case they forgot.

You are 18 years old. Your mother presents you with some kettle corn popcorn and Nutella, and you almost burst into tears again as you eat your favorite foods for the first time in months. You think you're being ridiculous over something so small and so simple, but you are so hungry and miss these flavors so much you don't worry about it too much. Your mother smiles as you gobble down the treats and looks like she plans on lovingly plying you with as much food as she can for as long as possible.

[2] The Crucible is the final event before a Marine recruit becomes a United States Marine. It is a 54-hour event that culminates in a ceremony where recruits are presented with a metal Eagle, Globe, and Anchor – the logo of the United States Marine Corps.

You are 18 years old. You make your mother cry when she sees you half-dressed one day, her eyes roving over the hip and rib bones that didn't protrude before you left for boot camp, the blister-torn flesh of your feet, and the scars you didn't use to have. She tells you that you look like a prisoner of war; you tell her you look like a Marine.

You are 21 years old. You are a Corporal of Marines.[3] You return home on leave to see your parents.[4] You stay at your mother's house in Miami, and you know she's happy to see you. You are glad to see her too, but you feel a bit disconnected from her. She doesn't understand your life – and by extension, she doesn't understand *you*. She can't reconcile her memory of her book-obsessed, quiet daughter with the woman that now stands before her: a woman who is married with a household of her own, who now smokes and drinks and curses and has multiple tattoos (none of which your parents approve), who has deployed overseas and lived on a Navy vessel for months.[5] You have experiences she does not have, and they have shaped you in ways that leave her both proud and disappointed. You feel the weight of her expectations on both accounts. You don't know how to explain your experiences to her in a way that would make sense to her. You decide to not even try. You have your Marines for that.

You are 22 years old. You transition out of the Marine Corps. You are now a veteran, and you return back home to Florida. After a few months, your mother one day looks at you and quietly says, "You're soft again, your edges aren't as harsh." You wonder what changed – you feel like the same person you used to be; you still feel like a Marine.

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[3] There are 9 ranks of enlisted personnel in the United States Marine Corps. Corporal is the 4th rank (E-4), the first rank to be recognized as a Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO).
[4] "On leave" refers to when a military member takes some time off – basically taking a vacation.
[5] The Marine Corps is a military branch, but it is also in the Department of the Navy. For this reason, Marines and Sailor often deploy together on Navy vessels, with Marine attachments assigned to the Navy vessel for the duration of the deployment. I deployed, attached to the Navy for 8 months, in 2017.

You are 23 years old. You are struggling with losing your sense of community, losing your sense of purpose. The depression and anxiety you picked up during your last years in the military aren't helping you move forward – although at least they are familiar entities, and that brings you some comfort. You start going to therapy, and keep going, keep trying, and in the midst of finally talking through past traumas with a stranger the Veterans Affairs (VA) Hospital assigned you, you visit your mother again. You finally tell her about your time in the military: all the good you thought she wouldn't understand and all the bad you had kept from her to protect her, to protect yourself from having to think about. You cry together, you laugh together, you hold each other.

You are 26 years old. You are a graduate student at the University of South Florida. You are tasked to conduct an interview for a class, and you decide to interview your mother. You ask her about her experience as a military family member. You hear what you've considered to be *your story* of your service from *her* point of view for the first time. It's not your story, it's hers. You are interviewing her, so you are there to listen, not to input your own truth. You realize your mother lived through far more than you ever knew. You were focused on what you were going through. Now though, you have the time, maturity, emotional space, and mental capacity to focus on meeting more than her most basic needs. The interview sparks more conversations, more understanding, more grace and peace than either of you had before.

You are 27 years old. You want to talk about this with other family members. You wonder if other families who also did not know much about the military before one of their family members joined went through similar experiences as your family. You hope they are willing to share their stories, and vow to listen to them and give them the space to share. You

title your project “Disruptions in the Experiences of First-Time Military Family Members” and start working.

Introduction and Overview

United States (U.S.) military service members (SMs) and their families confront a multitude of stressors and challenges, some of which are unique within the military community and others common within families and relational dynamics. How military families deal with these challenges/stressors and how to better support these families has been a salient research area for both the U.S. government and the academic community (Department of Defense, 2017; Feinberg et al., 2020; Gewirtz et al., 2014; Houston et al., 2013; Owen & Combs, 2017). However, the majority of this research focuses on military families consisting of a service member, a spouse, and the couple’s child(ren). Furthermore, much of the research centers on supporting these families *in* and *after* service (communication during deployment, reintegration after deployment, transitioning from the military to civilian life, etc.).

There is a collection of programs and research into supporting the families of military service members throughout their service. However, there are areas where more attention could be given, such as who is included and investigated in a “military family” and the periods of service where support is (not) available. This study argues for the expansion of who is included in the definition of a “military family” to include a service member’s parents/parental figures and siblings, as well as enlarging the period of interest in military service of academia to include when SMs first enter the military. This study focuses on the experiences and disruptions of military service members’ family members, specifically families who have no prior experience with the military before one of their members joins (coined “first-time military family member”). Through the sensitizing framework of Buzzanell’s (2010) communication theory of resilience

and Braun et al. (2019) reflexive thematic analysis, this study delves into how first-time military family members of servicemembers are emotionally and physically affected by their SM's military service and deepens how we see resilience constructed and enacted.

The importance and necessity for this study emerge not only from the literature, but also from my own and my family's experiences. I am a female United States Marine Corps veteran who is also a first-generation American; my family had no previous knowledge of the military and limited information about the U.S., which led to difficulties that were different from families who had family members or close friends already in the military which they could rely on for information and empathy. The previous section, titled "Blue Tennis Shoes on Yellow Footprints: A Personal Narrative of a Daughter and United States Marine" gives some context of what the first few moments in the military may look like for SMs, especially for those reading who may not be SMs/veterans – or have previous knowledge of the military. Although this study focuses on the experiences of family members rather than the SM, having the perspective of family members (as family members were asked to describe their experience of the boot camp and the following years of service – and these answers will be provided further below in the thesis) helps paint a more holistic picture of what these families as a whole experience. The personal narrative also illustrates how young many SMs are when they join their respective branches, lending credence to why parents and siblings should be encompassed in the research of military families rather than only spouses and children.[6]

[6] The Department of Defense (DOD) reports that approximately half of the U.S. armed forces, including both officer and enlisted, are 25 years old or younger (Department of Defense, 2022). This number comes from the current ages of service members serving as the DOD does not report the age of their members upon enlisting into the military. As such, many of the service members who fall into the older categories at the moment were much younger when enlisting, and fall into the younger category in terms of their age when enlisting. This phenomenon can also be seen in Table 1, which states what ages the first-time military family member's service members where when they joined.

This study acknowledges how different families may need different kinds of support and collaborates with first-time military family members to determine what would have been most helpful for them when their service member first entered the military. Chapter Two examines previous literature on military families, defines what is a first-time military family member, and overviews this study's theoretical framework. Chapter Three delves into the methods of this project: the 12 participants interviewed, the study design, and the methodology of data analysis. Chapter Four analyzes and interprets the results of the interviews. Lastly, Chapter Five encompasses a discussion of the results, the interview process itself, limitations of the study, and possible future directions.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining Military Families

The most common definition of a military family is a family consisting of a SM, a spouse, and possibly a child or children (Yablonsky et al., 2016, p. 43). This definition is seen in academic research about military families and in programs offered by the U.S. government. A possible reason behind this narrower focus of who counts as "family" comes from whom the U.S. government and military consider a SM's *dependent*. According to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (n.d.), a dependent can be a spouse or a child. To be considered a dependent, the child of a SM must be someone who financially depends on their family: under 18 years old (or in school full-time if between 18 and 23 years old), or permanently disabled before turning 18 years old (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d.).

A parent of a SM can only be considered a dependent if the SM is taking care of the parent, who would be earning below a certain amount (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, n.d.). However, for a majority of SMs, the military only counts their spouse and children as those who are eligible to receive special benefits – such as relocation assistance, deployment readiness, health insurance/benefits, and more – as military family members (Department of Defense, 2017). This reality is both demonstrated by and compounded as dependents (usually spouses and children) are the only ones considered "family members" in the Department of Defense's annual demographic reports (Department of Defense, 2021).

While this distinction is logical in terms of who is financially dependent on the SM and is most likely to have to relocate with the SM when ordered by the military, it can leave researchers with an incomplete view of who is directly affected by the SM and whom SMs rely on during their service. Many of those entering the U.S. military are young adults, and the support of consistent wages, health insurance, and childcare makes it easier for many SMs to begin families (Feinberg et al., 2020, p.110). However, since many SMs enter military service as young adults, their parents/parental figures and siblings are still highly involved in their lives and are in turn affected by seeing their loved one leave to serve in the military. Bartone (2015) explains how although parents are not often considered dependents, they are often a SM's next of kin – the individual that will be notified in case of a SM's death or serious injury. Furthermore, regardless of the age of the SM, the emotional upheaval experienced by the SM's parents and siblings has a distinct possibility of remaining high.

Despite not being considered dependents, parents/parental figures and siblings of SMs both affect and are affected by their military member's service[7]. Mothers of both deployed and non-deployed SM have been found to experience significant emotional distress, severe enough to be "indicative of anxiety and depression in women" (Slaven-Lee et al., 2011, p. 168). However, parents of combat veterans who *did* deploy can "be indirectly traumatized by their offspring's military experiences" and therefore experience secondary posttraumatic stress symptoms (PTSS) (Zerach & Gordon-Shalev, 2022, p. 2801). Adolescent siblings of SMs have also been shown to have a higher risk (by 36%) of having depression than those who do not have a sibling that is

[7] The term "military parent" was considered for use to refer to parents of service members, as there is research using the term in this way (Basinger & Knobloch, 2018; Wilson et al., 2019). However, the term is also in use to refer to service members who were parents (Hajal et al., 2020; Hisle-Gorman et al., 2019; So et al., 2018), and to prevent confusion, the term will not be used in this paper.

currently a SM, and having a sibling in the military was associated more with displaying depressive symptoms than having a parent serving in the military (London, 2021).

Military family members must navigate the intense positive and negative emotions that emerge from their child/sibling/spouse/parent's time in the military. Basinger and Knobloch (2018) explored how parents of SMs coped with having a child in the military by creating a model illustrating how parents communicated about their child's service in online forums. Results revealed that parents of SMs were deeply affected by the lack of information given by the military, loss of time together with their child, tumultuous emotions that come from their child's service (e.g. pride, anxiety), and shortage of communication during certain events (boot camp/basic training, training exercises, or deployment) despite not usually living in the same household as the SM during their service like spouses and children of SMs. Their findings show how the experience of being a military family member is not a uniformly positive or negative experience; thus, this study begins with the notion that military life and culture is complex and multifaceted rather than stereotypical or singularly defined.

In Basigner and Knobloch's (2018) study, parents of SMs found ways to cope with their child's service – usually by finding informational and emotional support, finding others with similar experiences, or reflecting on the positives of their child's service. Although not focused explicitly on first-time military family members, several excerpts from Basinger and Knobloch's work suggest that some of their participants were first-time military family members – which provides a basis for this study.

Parents/parental figures and siblings of SMs also influence their SMs in terms of their service and their transition back to civilian life after service. Parents and spouses were found to play important roles in encouraging SMs to seek professional help following overseas

deployment (Wilson et al., 2019). This is incredibly important as SMs whose family encouraged them to seek professional help for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) were almost twice as likely to do so than those whose family did not encourage them (Spoont et al., 2014). The emotional upheaval experienced by parents/parental figures and siblings of SMs and the support they provide to SMs validates why it is important to consider more than simply spouses and children of SMs as part of a military family. Furthermore, considering the negative effects that the lack of information can cause family members through their SM's careers and deployments, it can be beneficial to consider how lack of information and knowledge can also affect first-time military family members when their SMs enlist (Faber et al., 2008).

Defining First-Time Military Families

In the multidimensional context discussed above, first-time military families are defined as families who do not have functional or generational knowledge about the military to rely on as their SM enters the military. First-time military family members who do not have functional knowledge of the military are described here as those who do not have loved ones – such as close family members or friends – in the service (whom they have seen go through the process already), do not have background information on military terminology or service progression (Basinger & Knobloch, 2018), and do not have a support system already set up with knowledge of the military. A lack of generational knowledge is established in this study as the family member of the SM not having any close family members (grandparents, parents/parental figures, siblings, aunts/uncles, first cousins, nieces/nephews) who have joined the military while that family member has been alive and have served at least six months. Although each family is unique, these guidelines help set a boundary condition to define the 'no previous experience' of first-time military family members.

Parents of SMs might turn to other family members or friends who have been through this experience and can therefore empathize with them and more generally understand the situation. However, for first-time military family members, this can present complications as there is no support system already in place that they could ask for relevant information or with whom they could talk with and feel understood. First-time military family members do not have the informational infrastructure that other families may have. For example, different programs exist to help service members and their families transition from civilian to military life. However, for first-time military family members, the knowledge that these programs exist cannot be passed from relatives or friends who have experience with the military. So how will they know these programs exist and utilize them?

First-time military family members present a special importance due to how the military is changing. After the Vietnam War, the U.S. military transitioned to an all-volunteer force; in other words, there has been a significant gap of time where the general public has not been conscripted or drafted (De Angelis & Segal, 2015). The loss of the draft creates a new reality with a smaller military where it is not as common for families to have an immediate family member who has served. In 2011, the PEW Research Center found that only a third of Americans aged 18-29 had an immediate family member (defined as a spouse, parent, sibling or child) who had served in the military compared to three-fourths of Americans over 50. Even for families who do have extended family members who were drafted, these members are now grandfathers and great-grandfathers – meaning the younger/upcoming generations of the family have not seen them go through their service and may have little if any additional information about the military or military culture compared to an individual whose immediate and extended family has no known history of service. Given this context, my first research question asks:

RQ1: (*How) are first-time military family members disrupted (emotionally, physically, financially) when their loved one joins the U.S. military and they have no prior experience with military life or the military in general?*

Considering first-time military family members is also significant when it comes to immigrant families, which include both first-generation Americans and noncitizens. Although the Department of Defense does not collect information on how many SMs are first-generation Americans, over 100,000 noncitizens have joined the US military from 2010-2021 (Military Naturalizations, n.d.). Immigrant families have their own difficulties, such as language barriers or lack of informational and emotional infrastructure when most of their families reside in different countries or time zones, which are then compounded when they also become first-time military family members. For first-time military family members who do not know where to go for information about the military, not knowing the language in which the military operates would only further complicate matters and make the acquisition of the necessary knowledge extremely difficult.

In addition to nationality or immigration status, other identities also overlap and interact in unique ways for first-time military family members. Intersectionality focuses on how race, gender, socioeconomic class, sexuality, age, and other identities complicate and augment dynamics of power and resources, as well as our perceptions of difference and sameness (Cho et al., 2013). Intersectionality plays a part in how disruptions occur or manifest for the first time military families – for instance, first-time military families with a female SM entering the military may identify additional or different disruptions (worrying about their female family member entering a foreign environment, not being able to find much information about women in the military, or wondering if their female SM will experience a different training evolution

than male SMs) when compared to first time military families with a male SM enlisting. Intersectionality may also account for how different families can(not) access material assets when their service member is in the military, such as enrolling in support programs when the family member is not a U.S. citizen or resident. For first-time military family members, intersectionality provides a lens through which to honor and implicate how different military families' access to resources and information can be further limited or amplified.

First-time military family members are a group that is not often emphasized in military programs and research, and this lack of focus has implications for how we approach providing support to military families. As a concept, first-time military families expand the focus from a SM's dependents to their immediate family members – a holistic view of those who are significantly affected by their family member's service. Studying these families deepens how we view military families and asks us as researchers to consider how families construct support systems, how families navigate an informational deficit, and how external factors (such as immigration or socioeconomic status) can obfuscate these processes.

Periods within Military Service and the Military as an Institution

The areas that are more heavily researched in terms of military service are the stressors that occur *during* and *after* military service for both SMs and their families. During military service, SMs can experience challenges such as numerous relocations, separation from family, and both humanitarian and/or combat deployments (Houston et al., 2013; Feinberg et al., 2020; Riggs & Riggs, 2011, Yablonsky et al., 2016). These events can be significant not only for SMs, but for their families. Villagran et al. (2013) found that there were "contradictory realities" that SMs spouses had to reconcile during deployment, when they had to undergo "physical, psychological, and social difficulties due to prolonged separations from their partners" (p.1),

such feeling like they are failing to live up to the stereotypical standard of a military spouse or struggling with maintaining their social networks while their spouse is gone from home.

After military service, SMs also face significant challenges dealing with physical and mental injuries following service (Kolaja et al., 2022; Spoont et al., 2014). Both mental and physical injuries are often not something that veterans (SMs who have completed their military service) can heal from easily or quickly; they often will carry these scars for life. SMs can also encounter other challenges following their transition from military service, including finding employment in the civilian workforce "that matches their aptitudes and interests as well as their military training and work experiences" (Bond et al., 2022, p. 321) and loss of their military identity and sense of purpose (Park et al., 2021).

Although the periods in military service discussed above are extremely relevant to SMs', veterans', and their families' overall health and well-being, the period concerning the challenges and stressors of *entering* the military is equally important. Current research exploring entrance into the U.S. military is not as numerous, and the research that does exist often focuses on the physical risks and dietary effects of beginning military service for the SM rather than the holistic challenges for SMs and their families (Fagnant et al., 2020; Guerriere et al., 2021; Nakayama et al., 2019). However, the period of SMs entering the military and first-time military family members becoming military families is a time when families do not know what to expect, who to ask for information or clarification, or what will be the progression of events surrounding their SM's enlistment; it is a time of uncertainty for these families as they do not have previous experience or support systems to help navigate this new time in their lives.

As compared to starting a new job with most organizations, joining the military has larger implications for the SM and their family's lives (Whermen, 2023). The military has been

described as both a “greedy institution” and a “totalistic organization” due to its unusually high level of involvement in its SMs’ lives, including during entrance into the military (Howe & Hinderaker, 2018; Segal, 1986). The US military is “greedy” in the intensity of its demands on SMs – ranging from possible death or serious injury, separations from family members and home, and moves to foreign nations – as well as on their families (Segal, 1986). The military is considered “totalistic” due to a highly value-based membership (e.g., patriotism, honor, and discipline), an organizational identity that extends into members’ lives beyond what is typical (including their families), and complete loyalty which includes the swearing of an oath during entrance (also known as the “Enlistment Oath”) and throughout time in service (Howe & Hinderaker, 2018). For example, in Marine Corps boot camp, new members (also known as recruits) are physically separated from their family, their cell phones are taken, and extremely limited communication with their family is allowed. Viewing the US military as a greedy institution or totalistic organization is salient to understanding why the entrance period could be such a jarring situation for SMs and their families – especially if they have no previous experience with the military or military culture.

Entrance into the military is also important to further explore because of the effects it has on the rest of the SM’s enlistment, as well as their families. Although the U.S. military offers programs such as the Delayed Entry Program (DEP) that “allow individuals time to prepare for their time in service,” these programs emphasize preparing SMs for their entrance into the military (Anderson, 2020). These programs, at most, offer parents and families a chance to participate in “Family Nights” or ask questions to their SM’s military recruiter (*Delayed Entry Program (DEP)*, n.d.). However, for families who do not have previous experience with the military, how do they know what questions to ask? How do they navigate the plethora of new

military terminology that is thrown their way? And how much can their SM support the family when they themselves are preparing to begin military service?

Theoretical Framework

The overlying framework I use to navigate the experiences of first-time military family members was Buzzanell's (2010) communication theory of resilience (CTR), which conceptualizes resilience as being created and maintained through social interactions. CTR has been applied to the military family frame in pieces such as Villagran et al. (2013), which investigated how military spouses construct a "battle rythmn" or resilience before, during, and after deployment – and Fanari et al. (2022), which analyzed how military spouses transferred resilience practices they built during their spouse's deployment to other contexts such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

CTR proposes that in response to "trigger events" (disruptions that elicit a resilience response, often during life changes or transitions; Scharp et al., 2021, p. 2), individuals socially construct resilience "within their material environments and societal discourses" via five processes (Buzzanell, 2019, p. 68). *Crafting normalcy* focuses on the interactions and stories told to create a sense that things are getting back to normal or to construct a new normal. *Foregrounding productive action while backgrounding negative feelings* is an approach that focuses on the "embodiment of resilience" – the acceptance of a difficult situation while still centering your attention on moving on with your life (Buzzanell, 2018, p. 101). *Affirming identity anchors* is a strategy where individuals reaffirm the identities most important to them, while *maintaining and using communication networks* is a process used to reaffirm their bonds with others by reaching out to strong and weak ties. Lastly, *putting alternative logics to work* is a

powerful approach where individuals challenge normative assumptions of grieving and acceptance. These processes are not linear or distinct but are ongoing and interconnected.

According to CTR, resilience does not emerge simply in response to trigger events, resilience is a continuous process, "constantly in a state of becoming–and sometimes triggers have been developing for a long time" (Buzzanell, 2021, p. 49). Trigger events provide an opportunity for resilience to activate, but are not the originating or finalizing point – individuals can develop anticipatory resilience (the ongoing process of accumulating both communicative and tangible resources to rely on when disturbances occur; Buzzanell, 2019) in response to or in preparation of trigger events. In a military context, Fanari et al. (2022) show that military spouses use practices learned during deployment – such as uncertainty management and worries about a loved one's safety – in response to similar issues arising in other contexts. Moreover, in a feminist orientation of CTR, trigger events are multi-layered and addressing one trigger event without identifying and addressing other trigger events that may not be as visible "can result in singular and/or simplistic outcomes" (Buzzanell, 2021, p. 50).

One aspect of CTR which differentiates it from other manifestations of resilience is its critical "refocusing [of the] inability to 'bounce back' from individual deficit…to politicized contexts in which material resources, policies, and ideological structures about the nature and characteristics of families are socially constructed and enacted" (Buzzanell, 2018, p. 99). This focus may allow researchers to delve into the experiences of first-time military family members and investigate not only how different individuals and families adapt and/or transform as a family member joins the military, but also how different cultures and family situations (such as families who are undocumented immigrants) affect the ongoing process of a family member joining the military and serving for years. The communication theory of resilience affords a

framework to account not only for how the family or individual attempts to adapt to the military service of a family member, but also how outside forces (such as gender, nationality, sexuality, or socioeconomic status) affect and stimulate that experience. My second research question asks:

RQ2: *How do first-time military families (struggle to) enact resilience having no previous experience with the military?*

I have chosen CTR as a theoretical framework, in part, because the theory's ontological assumptions are consistent with the cyclical nature of being a first-time military family member. For first-time military family members, their experience is defined not only by seeing their family member join the military and leave home, but by their lack of knowledge about military terms and culture, as well as their race, class, and nationality. First-time military family members do not experience only one disruption (their family member joining the military) but rather must navigate a multitude of experiences and events over time that both morph and reaffirm their identity as *first-time* military family members.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Participants and Recruitment

For this study, 12 participants were interviewed. Inclusion criteria for first-time military family members were included in the recruitment materials and verified with participants during our interview. Specifically, first-time family members had to be currently 18 years of age or older (some family members, specifically two sisters of SMs, were under 18 when their SM first joined the military but over 18 years old during the time of the interview), currently live in the United States (several first-time military family members were originally from other countries or lived in other nations when their SM joined or during service, all family members lived in the U.S. at the time of the interview), and had to speak English or Spanish. SMs or military veterans of first-time military families must have entered the service less than 20 years ago, served active duty for at least six months, and been in the military for at least three years. These periods of time allowed for family members and SMs to have ample time to be entrenched in military life/culture. Although one focus of this paper was expanding the definition of military families, spouses were not excluded from the study: parents/parental figures, siblings, grandparents and spouses were all included.

Lastly, first-time military family members needed to have no previous experience with the military: no close family members (grandparents, parents/parental figures, siblings, aunts/uncles, first cousins, nieces/nephews) or other loved ones – such as close family friends – who have joined the military while that family member has been alive, no or minimal

background information on military terminology and service progression, and not having a support system already set up with military knowledge.

For this study, participants ranged in age from 20 to 80 years of age. Nine of the twelve participants identified as Hispanic, one as Asian, one as Black, and one as White. The most common family roles for the participants I interviewed were mothers and wives: three participants were the mothers of SMs, and three were wives. Four of my participants were siblings of SMs (two were brothers, two were sisters), while one participant was a grandmother and one was a father. I interviewed multiple family members for two SMs, and hence there were seven SMs attached to the twelve family members. Of these seven SMs, four were in the Marine Corps, two in the Army, and one in the Air Force. Within the seven SMs, there were also two female SMs and five male SMs. Most SMs completed at least one deployment, with an average of about 8 years in service completed between the 7 SMs. For a complete listing of the participants, their pseudonyms, and background information about the SM and their family member, see Table 1.

The sampling plan for this study was a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. Due to my identity as a U.S. Marine who served in a variety of commands that fortunately had a demographically diverse group of SMs, I began by reaching out to the Marines and sailors with whom I served[8]. As I have also become a part of the veteran community and part of programs meant to help veterans, I also reached out to friends/acquaintances from these programs (veterans in academia workshops, veterans in the arts workshops, and my university's Veteran Success Office) to incorporate first-time military family members whose

[8] Although I was a Marine, I deployed on a Navy vessel for 8 months in 2017. For this reason, I served with several sailors with whom I remain in contact.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Psuedonym	Relation to Service Member	Gender	Age	Race	Nationality (Country of Origin)	SM Age at Enlistment	SM Race	SM Nationality	SM Gender	SM Branch	SM Years in the Military	SM Status	Number of SM Deployments
Maria	Mother	Female	57	Hispanic	Naturalized American (Venezuela)	17	Hispanic	American	Female	Marine Corps	2014-2019	Active	1
Javier	Father	Male	55	Hispanic	Naturalized American (Chile)	17	Hispanic	American	Female	Marine Corps	2014-2019	Active	1
Chila	Grandmother	Female	80	Hispanic	Naturalized American (Chile)	17	Hispanic	American	Female	Marine Corps	2014-2019	Active	1
Lisa	Wife	Female	26	Asian	Naturalized American (Vietnam)	21	Asian	Naturalized American (Vietnam)	Male	Army	2019-2022	Active	1
Kate	Wife	Female	36	White	American	18	White	American	Male	Air Force	2006-present	Active	2
Delilah	Sister	Female	21	Hispanic	American	23	Hispanic	American	Male	Marine Corps	2013-2018	Active	1
Renata	Mother	Female	58	Hispanic	Naturalized American (Brazil)	17	Hispanic	American	Female	Marine Corps	2013-2019	Active	1
Quenia	Wife	Female	35	Black	Naturalized American (Kenya)	35	Black	Naturalized American (Keyna)	Male	Army	2008-2020	Reserve (activated for 5 years)	3
Tony	Brother	Male	27	Hispanic	Naturalized American (Mexico)	19	Hispanic	Naturalized American (Mexico)	Male	Marine Corps	2014-2019	Active	0
Isabella	Mother	Female	54	Hispanic	Naturalized American (Mexico)	19	Hispanic	Naturalized American (Mexico)	Male	Marine Corps	2014-2019	Active	0
Valeria	Sister	Female	20	Hispanic	American	19	Hispanic	Naturalized American (Mexico)	Male	Marine Corps	2014-2019	Active	0
Alejandro	Brother	Male	30	Hispanic	Naturalized American (Mexico)	19	Hispanic	Naturalized American (Mexico)	Male	Marine Corps	2014-2019	Active	0

**Participants surrounded by a thick black outline all have the same SM (they are in the same blood family).*

SMs were/are in branches other than only the Marine Corps and the Navy. One aspect that I maintained focus on was being self-reflexive about interviewing first-time military family members of SMs who were diverse in terms of age, gender, sexuality, race, nationality, and class. I believe these aspects of our identities can inform how first-time military family members cope with their SM's service; I do not believe there is a stereotypical first-time military family and hope to prevent inadvertently promoting that in my research.

Once I contacted my network of SM and veterans for permission to contact their families, I asked them to pass on my information to other first-time military family members they might know. I attempted to speak with more than one first-time family member in each family, if possible, to gain multiple perspectives of one SM entering the service and the dynamic of each family. I was successful in this goal with two families in particular, both of whom I knew before starting my research.

However, reaching out to SMs with whom I served and the veteran community I participated in only allowed me to interview eight participants, most of which were part of two families and their SMs were all in the Marine Corps. In hopes of diversifying my data in terms of military branch and participant group, I contacted another military support program for families called Blue Star Families. This program put me in contact with a moderator for a Facebook support group for foreign-born spouses, military spouses who were born in nations other than the U.S. before joining their SMs in the U.S. I reached out to this group and was able to interview two foreign-born spouses for this project as well, which allowed me to diversify my sample in terms of race slightly more, as well as SM military branch affiliation. Based on my continuous efforts in reaching out to my military contacts, I was also able to interview two more participants from my personal network, which resulted in a total of 12 first-time military family members.

Study Design

The method of data collection with the first-time military family members was semi-structured interviews. The interviews, which ranged from 30 to 90 minutes, took place either face-to-face, over the phone, or via technologically mediated platforms (e.g., Teams, Facebook Messenger). Interviews were recorded with the family member's permission and the family member was informed that they were able to withdraw at any time and did not have to answer any questions they did not feel comfortable answering. First-time military family members were also given pseudonyms and were given the choice to choose their own or have one assigned.

The interviews consisted of questions such as "What thoughts or emotions do you remember having when you found out that your SM wanted to enlist? How, if at all, did the emotions/worries/thoughts you have change between the time you found out your SM was enlisting and when your SM left for boot camp/basic training?", "How did you find support while your SM was in the military? Did you build a network or rely on the support you already had?" and "Imagine one of your friends had a [age when SM enlisted]-year-old [SM family position] who wanted to enlist in the [SM branch]. How would you feel? What would you tell them? Would you have any advice?" For spouses who were married and involved in military life after their spouse joined the military, questions regarding the SM's entrance into service were amended to ask about when the first-time military family member joined the family and military culture. See Appendix A for a complete interview guide for my interviews in English, including the amended questions for spouses who did not experience the entrance period of the SM; and Appendix B for an interview guide in Spanish (only Isabella's interview was conducted in Spanish, the other 11 were conducted in English, with Maria explaining certain answers in English and Spanish).

This project followed the guidelines set by Braun et al. (2019), which argued against the use of saturation (a common technique that encompasses interviewing participants until new themes no longer emerge) to gauge my sample as this practice may be rife with underlying assumptions of concepts and themes. Braun et al. (2019) suggest basing sample size on the specificity of the research question, the themes constructed and the richness of the data. In light of these "rules of thumb," my research questions were highly focused on resilience and how families could or struggled to enact it in the face of disruptions, my interviews aimed for description and richness, and themes were continuously revised throughout the analysis of the data.

In addition to Braun et al. (2019), my sample size of 12 was also determined by tangible and university constraints. The process of speaking with individuals about this project, reaching out to possible participants, interviewing and transcribing took significant time. However, as this project is my thesis and a requirement of my graduation, I had to work within the limits of my graduation date. Despite these confines, my sample size was sufficient to provide abundant themes and plenty of data to analyze.

Data Analysis

To analyze the process of resilience and disruptions first-time military family members experience, I utilized Braun et al. (2019) reflexive thematic analysis. Reflexive thematic analysis (TA) follows six coding phases: familiarization, generating codes, constructing themes, revising themes, defining themes, and producing the report (Braun et al., 2019). These phases can be overlapping and are meant to be interconnected. Reflexive TA focuses on "theoretical knowingness and transparency; the researcher strives to be fully cognisant of the philosophical sensibility and theoretical assumptions informing their use of TA; and these are consistently,

coherently and transparently enacted throughout the analytic process and reporting of the research" (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594). Reflexive TA has been used in a multitude of contexts and countries, ranging from exploring the maternity experiences of refugee women in Australia (Dube et al., 2024) and the narratives of patients post Hepatitis C in Switzerland (Guggusberg et al., 2022), to investigating the psychological needs of SMs after reintegration – or leaving the military to reintegrate into civilian society – here in the U.S. (Raabe et al., 2024).

After the first few interviews were conducted, they were transcribed, and the first two phases of reflexive TA began (familiarization and generating codes). This allowed these interviews to inform future interviews, a mark of the iterative process of reflexive TA (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Although my orientation for coding was mostly deductive, as I approached the data with the theory of CRT and my identity as a SM of a first-time military family, I opted to approach my first reading of the transcript inductively (as much as possible). I chose to do this as a way to not only see what I expected to find in the transcripts based on my own experiences and the literature, but to "identify meaning without importing ideas" (Braun et al., 2019, p. 48).

During the interviews themselves, I relied on the video or audio recording of my participants to capture their answers and transcribed them afterward. To assist me, I utilized the transcript function for the interviews I conducted on Microsoft Teams (3 interviews) and used Otter.Ai, a transcription service, for those interviews I conducted in person (4 interviews) and on the phone (5 interviews). Once the service created a base transcription, I then verified each interview for accuracy and corrected any mistakes before beginning to code. I coded each response with 1-5 codes, depending on the length of the response, paying special attention to the language the participants used and the emotions they emphasized. A few examples of my in vivo codes were "Not something I would do," "I kept myself busy," "Betrayed by the Marines," and

"Fear that something is going to happen." Throughout the interview process, I also wrote memos to aid in my analysis and verify coding throughout. These memos included notes about concepts participants mentioned during their interviews, notes during my own brainstorming, and details of what I discussed with my thesis advisor during our weekly meetings.

Once all the interviews were transcribed and codes were generated, I began the next four stages of reflexive TA. For example, the in vivo codes "My child in danger" and "Fear that something is going to happen" were constructed into the theme *Worries About SM Personal Safety*. The candidate themes "Conflicting Emotions" and "Support as Sacrifice" were revised and defined into the theme *Using Support as a Family Sacrifice*. The process of constructing, revising, and defining themes led me to realize the themes in this project were quite interrelated and allowed me to start to see connections between themes. This interconnectivity of themes resulted in the creation of a thematic map (Figure 1) to "visualize how the themes fit together and tell the overall story of [the] data" (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 856).

Reflexive TA was a powerful methodology for navigating the experiences of first-time military family members and also required me to account for my own identity within the project as not only a researcher of military communication, but as a SM who has experienced parts of being a first-time military family member as an auxiliary party. In reflexive TA, an emphasis is on "the researcher's reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data and their reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the analytic process" rather than the following specific steps in order to complete my analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 594). These guidelines became a strength in analyzing my data as they mirrored the nature of CTR: both my theoretical framework and methodology were process-based rather than linear, recursive rather than distinct.

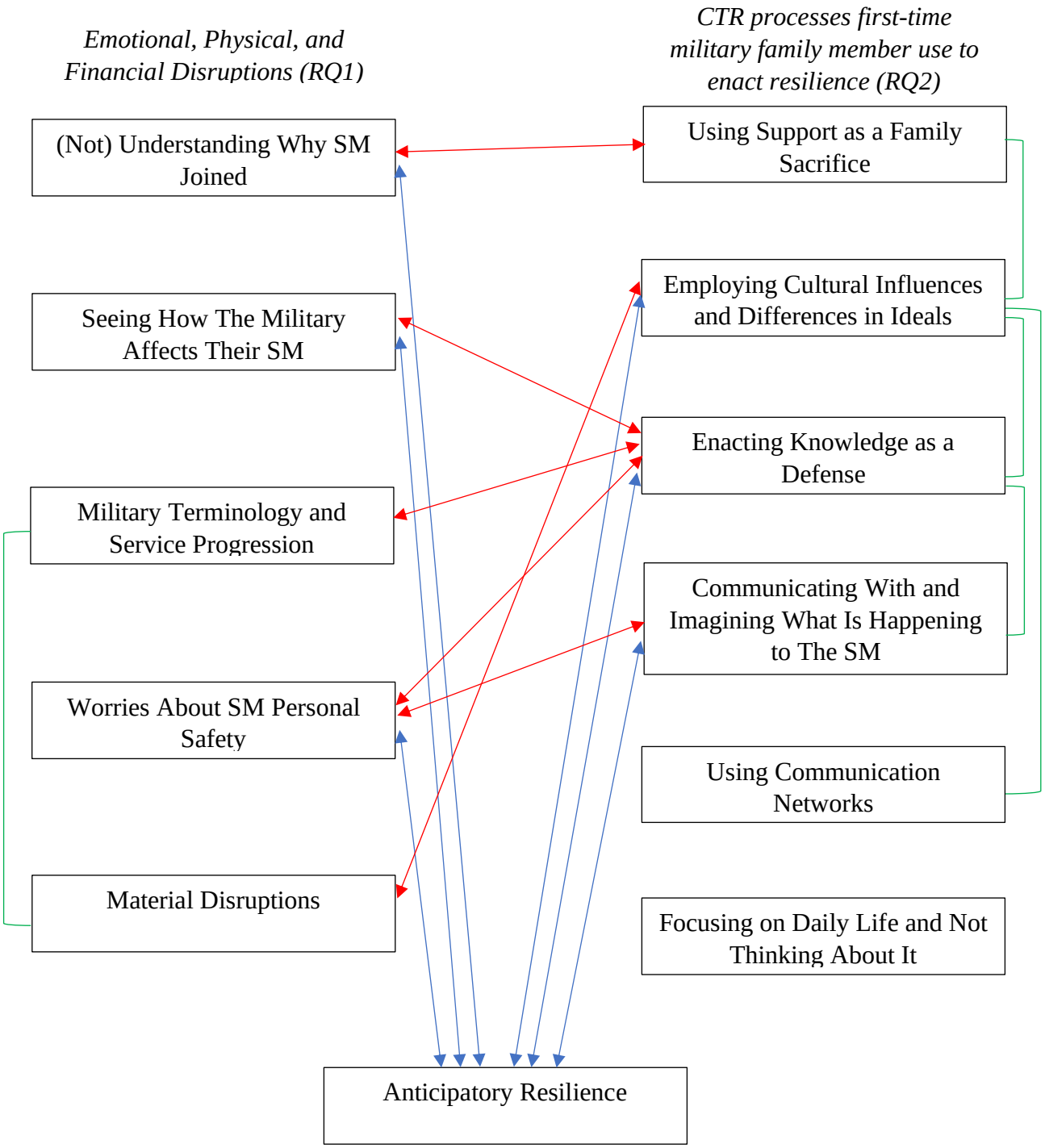

Figure 1. Thematic Map of Experiences of First-Time Military Family Members

**Red connections are those between processes and disruptions, green connections are those within disruptions or processes and blue connections are the connections between processes/disruptions and anticipatory resilience. Arrows demonstrate themes occurring in the same participant response.*

I focused on Tracy's (2020) eight big tent criteria for high-quality qualitative research to substantiate both my practices throughout the data collection stage/coding process and the ethical considerations/academic significance of my overall study: worthy topic, rich rigor, sincerity, credibility, resonance, significant contribution, ethics, and meaning coherence (p. 270). Although all eight criteria are salient and were considered throughout the study design, data collection and writing processes, the two I placed the most importance on for the trustworthiness of this study are credibility and sincerity. As such, I focused on thick description and multivocality by emphasizing participant excerpts and in vivo coding throughout my analysis, and emphasized transparency about difficulties, decisions, and bias.

To further verify my data analysis, I also performed a negative case analysis and created an audit trail (Scharp et al., 2021). To perform a negative case analysis, I made sure that all the responses I recorded in my interviews were present in the themes that were created from my data (Kidder, 1981). The audit trail was generated from the detailed notes taken both throughout the interview process, as well as during the coding process and analysis of themes.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

This chapter analyzes and interprets how the twelve participants describe and construct their experiences as first-time military family members, with a focus on the entrance of their SM into the military (and in the case of the 3 spouses that were married after the SM entered into the military, a focus into their entrance into military life) and the cyclical nature of being a first-time military family member. This chapter is organized by the results from my two research questions and wrapped up with a section discussing anticipatory resilience across both research questions. The two research questions posited in this project were:

> (*How) are first-time military family members disrupted (emotionally, physically, financially) when their loved one joins the U.S. military and they have no prior experience with military life or the military in general? (RQ1)*
>
> *How do first-time military families (struggle to) enact resilience having no previous experience with the military (RQ2)*

Emotional, Physical, and Financial Disruptions in the First-Time Military Family Experience

(Not) Understanding Why SM Joined

The SM's entrance to the military – or declaration of intent to join the military – is often the initial disruption that first-time military families face. This moment is disruptive for first-time military families because of its unexpectedness. Several first-time military family members

reported not expecting their SM to want to join the military in the first place, such as Maria (a SM's mother), who states, "I don't know how that came into [her] mind as an option, because I didn't see it coming." Javier, father of a SM, also expresses, "It's not something I [would] do. I never thought my daughter [would] do it."

Although first-time military family members described having difficulty understanding why their SM chose the military, they often described still trying to be supportive of their SM's decision. Chila, the grandmother of a SM explains:

> And I was very proud of [her] for doing it. But I just wanted to be sure that that was what [she] want[ed]… I respected [her] a lot. Because you say, Oh, this is great. This is my granddaughter. She's, she's capable of deciding things that are not very traditional, let's say and, and do[ing] what she really feels like.

Maria, the mother of a SM who stated she didn't how her daughter came up with the idea of joining the military, similarly states:

> I think that the best day of my life was when [she was] born. And that day, that day we are talking about, the day that [she] left for bootcamp, was completely the opposite. And even wors[e], was not only the scare of what could happen, but the feeling of I am giving [her] away, because I had to sign, because [she was] a minor. And I sign because, I wasn't irresponsible, I did it because I knew that, that [she] wanted it.[9]

[9] Although there is a gendered component in this theme so far as all three family members (Javier, Maria, and Chila) mentioned being surprised that their female SM wanted to join, it is also important to note that all three of these family members have the same SM. The surprise regarding a female SM joining the military in this case may then not be because of the gender of the SM, but rather because the SM did not express a wish to join the military before enlisting. The family member of the only other female SM in this study did not express surprise, and so an interpretation regarding whether there is a gendered component to not understanding why SMs join is not possible at this junction.

For first-time military family members, not understanding why their SM joined the military caused them to construct narratives about supporting their SM because of their love and loyalty to the SM, which connects to the theme *Using Support as a Family Sacrifice* discussed later on.

However, some first-time military families, whether they expected their SM to join or not, understood why their SM decided to join the military. The reasons they gave centered around the idea that the military provided discipline that the SM needed to succeed. Alejandro, the brother of a SM, explains, "I thought it was a good thing for him because he needed to find some sort of structure and to find his way…He went to college, and he still didn't know what to do." Renata, the mother of a SM, also describes, "She couldn't find her place over here. She always [had] trouble adapting. And her family life was having a lot of problems. So I thought if she's away from this, her life may be better than mine." These responses demonstrate how in the case of families understanding why their SM joined, this trigger instead becomes a part of how they account for and justify their SM's service in the narrative of their SM's time in the military. Tony, the brother of an SM, highlights the importance of this trigger when asked about what he would do in a hypothetical situation of a friend's brother joining the military (Interview Question 10 in Appendix A): "I would listen to them and listen to the reason why they want to join."

Seeing How The Military Affects Their SM

The salience for first-time military family members understanding why their SM joined the military can be reflected in the possible trigger of first-time military family members seeing the toll the military takes on their SM. For some families, seeing the toll the military takes on their SM, especially due to expectations they might have had previous to their SM's entry into the military, can work against them. One example is the case of Renata (p. 61), who thought the military might help her daughter (her SM) and was not prepared for her daughter having to deal

with misogyny and harassment within the military. For other families, the toll the military takes on their SM does not interact with previous positive expectations but is still a trigger event that is affected by being a first-time military family because they do not know issues that are prevalent in the military. Javier, the father of a SM, explains:

> You know, I felt like, you know, it's like is the physical, you know? How you say? Like the physical aspect is too much. So I learn from her, and you know, what she has told me about her friends. Like almost everybody has a physical problem now and they are people you know, young people right in the 20s, right, you know, back pain, you know, hip pain and, you know, these kind of problems. So that is something that I felt that then the physical part of the being in military is too much, right, because those are things, you are at 20 and you have this problem, what will happen when you are 60?

The reality of seeing how the military negatively affects their SM can cause first-time military families to worry about their SM, and this concern was found prevalently among parents in my sample.

However, this trigger, much like *(Not)Understanding Why SM Joined* is not always a trigger. The distinction depends, in part, on the family narrative of whether the SM benefitted from their service or not, as well as on the family role and the individual family member. Although several parents reported seeing worrying negative effects of their SM service, one mother, Isabella, describes how her son benefitted from the military:

> Valió la pena, estuvo bien... cambió el, cambió mucho en todo... ya no era el mismo de cuando era niño... lo hicieron madurar mucho [Translation: It was worth it, it was

> good...he changed, he changed a lot in everything...he was no longer the same as when he was little...they made him more mature].

For Isabella, this narrative follows the family narrative that her SM benefitted from his time in the military. Tony, Isabella's son, agrees by stating that his brother continuously demonstrated he was doing well in the military:

> From the beginning it was a little rough because I had no idea what would go on. But then I felt like through time and because him coming back and visiting it did help because you know, we were able to ask more questions and just talking make sure that he was good.

As a unit (although they were interviewed separately), the family establishes that although they did not have many expectations about how the military would progress for their SM, seeing the positive changes in their SM built the family narrative that they could process the harder parts of his service by reaffirming he was benefitting from the military.

Conversely, family roles may also account for why this trigger is not present in the constructed, narrated experiences of all first-time military members. Javier, the father of a SM, expressed concerns when he saw how his SM had bodily injuries due to the physicality of the military (p. 35). Chila, the grandmother of the same SM, on the other hand, explains:

> [She was] happy…talking about [her] friends…[she sent] pictures of the group and everything. So it was kind of, we, we passed their hard phase of the transition, and now we are kind of at ease, you know, at ease we are okay, now she's a Marine and let's see what happens.

The difference between Javier and Chila may be due to a difference in family role (parent vs. grandparent), level of communication between family members (the SM might have been in contact with her father more than her grandmother), or the attitude and values of the individual.

Military Terminology and Service Progression

For many first-time military family members, certain aspects of military culture can be difficult to understand. There is a slew of jargon and acronyms (such as the entrance exam for the military – called the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery, or ASVAB for short) which are specific to the military. These terms are usually explained to SMs throughout the course of their enlistment, but there are not necessarily as many opportunities for family members to learn these terms or how they are used within the military context. Javier, the father of a female SM, mentions, "I found out that, I don't know if I asked directly or she told me that she was not going to be on the…what was called…in the, not the Army, I know she was going into the Marines, but not going to be in the first, like, soldiers that are going to go to the battleground" when explaining how he began to work through worries about his daughter having to be a stereotypical soldier that is on the front lines – a job that is called "the infantry" in the military. Once Javier learned that his SM would not be in the infantry, he was "very relieved."

For first-time military family members, especially those that did not grow up in the U.S. or learned English as their second or third language, military terminology can present a disruption to their resilience processes as this interferes with their ability to not only ask questions but also maintain their communication networks and build anticipatory resilience. Due to language barriers and military jargon, these first-time military family members did not have the vocabulary that helps others in the military community understand what they are talking

about. Maria, who was born and raised in Venezuela, expressed frustration about communicating with and understanding her daughter, who is a SM:

> Well, language also, because when we were talking, eh, with the military and the stuff, the, that gente, that uh, way of talking? [Translation: Well, language also, because when you talk, when we were talking, eh, with the military and the stuff, the, those people's, that uh, way of talking?] That, that, those words to me were like, I need to sit down and write down these and make like, a [dictionary], to make sense to, you know?

Moreso than simply terminology, first-time military family members also have to deal with rules specific to the military that are not common in the civilian sphere. Lisa, the wife of a male SM, explains:

> But for the military culture, there is a hierarchical and a hierarchical implicit language codes there that is embedded into the interaction or the language system. You have to call your leaders by a certain pronouns…There are some rules about what to interact, how to interact even outside of the military context. For example, like I, I'm not sure this is a normal rules, but I think it is a rule now, but a rules like you don't get to interact with like a active military spouse cannot interact with an officer spouse.[10]

Lisa attempted to use the online search engine Google to find information about not only military terminology, but the rules of military society she doesn't understand. Fraternization, the "personal relationships between officer and enlisted members that are unduly familiar and do not respect differences in rank and grade" (U.S. Department of the Navy, 2020), can be punishable

[10] When Lisa mentions calling leaders by "certain pronouns," she is referring to addressing your leaders by their military rank and last name. For example, when I was in the military, the Marines I led would not call me "Ana" they would call me "Sergeant Vidal."

by the military, and this attitude is often reflected in the lives of military spouses. But for Lisa, this behavior did not make much sense to her and led to feeling like she had to be careful and on guard every time she was around other military spouses; many times, trying to be mindful about military rules went against her natural inclination to "treat everyone as equal."

Confusion regarding the progression of military service, especially at the entrance into the military, can also be a disruption for first-time military families. When SMs join the military, they go through basic training, and then their job training, before being stationed at their permanent duty station. Once at their duty station, they perform their job until the end of their contract and can be deployed in time. The only instance in which this progression might be interrupted or accelerated is during times of draft or war, when basic training and job training may be compressed to get SMs to the front lines as soon as possible. However, this is not necessarily "common sense" for first-time military families, who might hear on the news about conflicts in other nations and worry that their SMs might be ripped from basic training to be thrown into war. Valeria, the sister of a Marine, says "It was more like frightening as in like, kind of like what you hear, that happens because you're just thinking like, Oh, he's going to war. But like in that 10-year-old headset, that's all I thought at the moment was like, Oh, he's joining [the military], he's going to war." Maria, the mother of a SM, also thought that her daughter could be sent to fight in a war in basic training: "I mean, in boot camp is, is difficult that they will enlist you, it has to be a major war or something like that…[But], I thought that the, the danger was all the time present."[11]

[11] Here, by "enlist," Maria means to send a SM to war. Her daughter was already enlisted when she went to boot camp, but what Maria means is that the possibility of being sent to war during boot camp is very low.

Beyond a SM's time in basic training, there can also be confusion about how their SM's time in service will play out. First-time military family members can also experience uncertainty about where their SMs will go, for how long, and when they could see them again. Delilah, the sister of a Marine, explains:

> Oh my god, I was so like, scared. I was, I was so scared for him. Because like, at the same time, like, mind you, like none of us really knew what was going to happen. Like we knew like he's gonna go off to like, boot camp or something. But that's like the most we knew. And then after that, we didn't know for how long he was going to be gone. If we were ever going to like see him like in between, or anything. Like I would just like, I would try to like, convince him like, Please don't go…I do remember that when me and my mom did drop him off like, initially to be the enlistment office, I guess is what it is. Where did they go and like, take them off to like boot camp? Oh, we were sobbing so much. And like till the point we even realize he had like, walked back to like, the truck would be like, "Hey, I haven't left." Because he was like, sneaking back. And he like told us like afterwards like, "Yeah, I saw you crying. I like walked back to like the car because it wasn't time yet"…Like we're sobbing because we didn't know like anything about it. And we're just like, super scared for him.

Because of difficulties in understanding the progression of service, several first-time military family members expressed a desire for the military to provide more information about what to expect in terms of the sequence of events for their SMs. Delilah says:

> I feel like something should at least be sent out, like, at least like some sort of like, letter, they'll be like, Hey, this is what's gonna happen. These are, this is like the process that what your kid's gonna go through, like, this is what's gonna go on, like, Don't worry, like,

> this is this is everything that's gonna happen. This is the process. Like, I should wish that there was like some sort of like letters or something that could help us you know, other than that we have, we had like, no idea what was going on, until [our SM] told us what was going on.

Worries About SM Personal Safety

First-time military families also felt an overwhelming amount of worry over the safety of the SM. This trigger event was extremely disruptive for families and was also recursive. First-time military family members expressed heartbreaking worry about physical safety in basic training, injuries or death during deployments, and problems due to the overall physicality of military service. This theme typically was brought up more than once in almost every interview. Isabella, the mother of a Marine, emotionally describes how she felt when her son left for Marine boot camp 10 years ago:

> No sabía si lo iba a volver a ver, de tanto que se oye, que se dice, y que tanto accidente que pasa…Fueron los años mas eternos de mi vida…Entré a depresión, salí yo sola…No sé si seré mama muy protectora [Translation: I didn't know if I was going to see him again, from what you hear, from what everyone says, and so many accidents happen… They were the longest years of my life...I went into depression, I got through it by my own merit...I don't know if I am just too protective as a mother.]

Another mother I interviewed, Maria, expressed similar thoughts regarding how it felt for her daughter to leave for Marine boot camp 10 years ago and whether the level of suffering she endured was because of her own beliefs:

> The part that I had problem with was the safety part…I, as a mom and as a person, as a person also, because if I see somebody in danger, I will get worried about that person. But [she is] my daughter, so is even an additional feeling, eh, you know, is more attachment, I guess…I didn't know where to look for help. I guess I had the opportunity to go to like a psychologist and of course pay for it, is not free. But I guess I could have done that, but I never even think about it. I thought that, uh...I don't know, that I had to go forward and keep going and keep going and keep going… So I think that in my case, I am too, too worried, too...I don't know, I don't feel like they are in the, not in this country, but all over the world, eh, parents are different. People are different. But parents and parenting, is completely different from one house to another. And I think my style is kind of, uh, killing me [laughs].

There are two parts to the previous excerpts: (a) the worry about their SM's safety being the major disruption and (b) feeling alone in the depth of their sentiment to the point of wondering if they were doing something wrong. As this thought was unique to these two mothers, there is the possibility that this sentiment might be connected to either their role in the family (mother of SM) or to their role in the family in their culture (as both Isabella and Maria are Hispanic mothers, raised in Mexico and Venezuela respectively).

Regardless of how these two participants internalized their worry, first-time military family members as a whole reported worry about their SM's personal safety as a trigger event. Javier, the father of a female Marine, mentions he thought, "Is my child going to be in danger?...So definitely the first thing in my head was, you know, her personal safety" when he found out his daughter was going into the Marines. Valeria, the sister of a Marine, explains that the "fear that something is going to happen to him. Like injury wise" was something that

remained throughout his enlistment, from when he first went into the military to when he was preparing to deploy.

Although first-time military families experience worry about the SM's safety at several points throughout the SM's enlistment, most first-time military family members identified deployment specifically as a time of concern. Chila, the grandmother of a SM, explains:

> There were possibilities of war everywhere, in, in the Asia and in the Middle East. And, and as [her] ship was so close to that area, I knew that if something happened, [she would] be called, you know, so that we're, that was my time of deepest worried, because I said how I'm going to know? You know, what can I do to help what it was, it was a very harsh time, let's say, for me, you know, especially that, in that time, we didn't communicate much and, and I say, I hope she doesn't worry that I'm worried. I hope she doesn't know that I'm worried. But I was really worried.

First-time military family members expressed distress over current events, physical danger, and a lack of communication due to their SM's deployment. For the few first-time military family members who did not elucidate a concern over their SMs deploying, they often explained that it was due to the lack of conflicts at the time – "I don't think there was anything going on in the world, kind of too drastic for us to worry about" (Alejandro) – or because their SM's job in the military did not put them in physical danger – "he's just like an engineer, it's gonna be okay" (Delilah).

Material Disruptions

First-time military families reported a variety of material disruptions during their SM's time in the military. These disruptions included issues both related to the military, as well as

challenges they had that did not have do with their SM's service, but happened during that time period. The material disruptions that were connected to military often revolved around moving to U.S. from another country. For the participants I interviewed, both participants that moved from other countries to the U.S. – Lisa and Quenia – were spouses.

Lisa, a spouse from Vietnam who came to the U.S. to complete her Ph.D. program and married her SM here, mentioned she had to go through the "green card process or like the immigration process," which presented some difficulties other military spouses that were already from the U.S. did not have. Quenia, a spouse from Keyna who came to the U.S. once she married her SM, reported similar difficulties with her process of immigrating and finding resources to help. Moreso, since Quenia had never been to the U.S. before, she was hit with a culture shock on top of trying to figure out military life – a process she had to go through alone since her husband had to leave on deployment a few weeks after she arrived:

> He was there the first two weeks. We tried as much as possible to get me situated with the basic that I would need. Ohh, here's a grocery store. Umm. And then because [in] Kenya we drive on the left side, [and in the U.S. you drive on the] right side, we try to get out every day to get on the road…So those two weeks were really packed with a lot of stuff because we had no choice. I had to be left in a way that I could function right and then he left. Now, after those two weeks, now I'm left with oh, now I'm alone… Where do I find what I wanna cook? Hmm, I know the grocery store, but they don't have the kind of food that I'm used to. So and then I wanted to say hi to somebody and there's, yeah, someone just passes you like you don't even like you were. You were not even there and it happens once, twice, three times. And I'm the what's going on?... So that's about a month in when I'm feeling like, OK, I guess I'm already a little settled and then

> the first thing I get is, “Uh, your law degree is not recognized in the U.S.” and that's the thing I thought because I that's already established my new degree. Can I can get the experience slowly?...Ah, what do you mean? I went to school for seven years…[Employers said I] have only experience in Kenya and UK, you don't have local experience, you know. So imagine you go through these 3 or 4 times. You're spending money and you're not getting anything.

After learning that she would have to go back to school to be able to practice law in the U.S., Quenia received news that she would have to move to another state because of her husband’s military orders. She decided to change careers since her previous career was too dependent on her not moving states which led to her accumulating “student loans because of the military.” These issues, especially her career difficulties, proved to be exacerbated by being a first-time military family member, as the lack of knowledge about relocations of the family based on military needs rather than family needs was not something Quenia knew about beforehand or even expected.

First-time military family members also spoke about other material disruptions that prevented them from being able to look for more information or resources about the military. Chila, the grandmother of a SM, explains that, “I was kind of concentrating in my health. Everything outside of my health, was about you and the family. But I didn't have the opportunity, and [where] I am, there is no military.” For Chila, the health issues she had physically prevented her from going to ask for more information about the military, and she was limited by living in a small town that did not have a recruiting office or military bases. Maria, the mother of a SM, also explained that her responsibilities, working a full-time job while also studying for a new career, prevented her from finding time to go out and look for more information, on top of her

difficulties understanding military terminology (see *Military Terminology and Service Progression* theme).

First-Time Military Families and How They (Struggle to) Enact Resilience

Using Support as a Family Sacrifice

By using alternative logics, first-time military family members demonstrated a high level of sacrifice for their SM in the form of foregoing their own wants or their family's desires. Alejandro, the brother of a SM, describes how despite his family wanting their SM to visit them while he was in the military, his brother found it difficult to come home:

> He wasn't happy here [at home]. He was miserable. So as soon as he got here, he was like, you know, he used to go back. He needed to find himself, being in his rhythm and just getting out faster, finish quicker and get out quicker and then he can have time to relax.

The loyalty to the SM over the wishes of the family echoes throughout every interview conducted. Patricio, the father of a SM, states, "It was kind of surprising why, you know, she will be interested in the military…I will support her anyway." Isabella, the mother of a SM, asserted, "esas decisiones de el...tenia ganas de ir...no queda de otra cuidarlo [Translation: those decisions of his...he wanted to go... there's no other option but to support him]."

First-time military family members reported the importance of being a source of strength and stability for their SMs, independent of whether they agreed with their SM member joining, volunteering to go on deployment, or re-enlisting. This sense of loyalty did not necessarily extend to the military as families felt the expectation of the military mission over family wishes. For example, Quenia, the spouse of a SM, expressed frustration over her husband being ordered

to “up and leave,” leaving “the family [to] really [take] a back seat,” but focuses on the military being the issue instead of her SM. The sense of loyalty first-time military families have to the SM but not to the military marks a difference from the dominant narratives of military spouses, narratives that fall more along the lines of being married to not only the SM, but to the military mission (Villagran et al., 2013).

Although first-time military families may not have a plethora of knowledge about deployment tempo or military culture when their SM enters the military, they demonstrate that supporting their SM takes precedence over the “rollercoaster” (Quenia) of emotion and events that accompanies having a family member in the military. First-time military families elevate their SM above the rest of the family (including themselves) and place the responsibility of challenges that come their way on the military rather than on the SM choosing to join the military. This thought uses alternative logics as it allows first-time military families to remain supportive and close to their SM without having to remain loyal to the military institution, an alternative to the dominant narrative of other military families seen in Villagran et al. (2013) and Javier’s response (p. 49-50) in the *Employing Cultural Influences and Differences in Ideals* theme, where military families feel like if they want to support their SM, they must also support the American military mission.

Employing Cultural Influences and Differences in Ideals

First-time military family members identified and affirmed identity anchors that allowed them to cope with their experiences as a military family. However, these identity anchors were not those related to the military, such as “military spouse” or “military family,” but rather those connected to the countries they were born in or their families. Lisa, the spouse of a SM, declares that she doesn’t connect with or consider herself a military spouse, and sees herself as

Vietnamese rather than American. Kate, another spouse of a SM, mentions how she acknowledges the fact that her husband is in the military, but for her, the focus is on the family rather than on being a military family:

> For our family, we kind of tried to keep it that way…We're not like completely emerged in the usual things, like we do not live on base, we do not go to every single ball and event like, I don't know, he's in the military. We love our country. But, you know, like, it's how we support our family. But at the end of the day…it's just a job.

Kate also emphasizes that she doesn't relate to or claim the label of "military spouse" because "they just seemed fake… Like, I wanted to be friends with someone who wanted to be my friend, not because you worked with my husband, or just because you are a military spouse."

First-time military family members can also unintentionally reject identity anchors because they are unaware certain military identities exist. Quenia, the spouse of a SM, was unaware of the term "military spouse" until after her SM had completed his time in the military:

> There's nothing for me to consider in terms of how it would impact my life because I did not know what to expect or whether or not it was going to impact my life because the idea in my mind was OK, that's your military, and this is gonna be us…There was no clear information of what to expect as a military spouse, a term I also just came to learn years after when he was actually separating from the military or getting, you know, being retired.

Quenia, originally from Keyna, emphasizes her expectations due to her previous nationality and her identity as a first-time military family member. These left her both not considering that there would be specific terminology attached to roles in military families, but also thinking that there

would be a level of separation between her family and the military that she did not experience. This rejection of identities that bond other military families suggests that the labels others place importance on (seen in forums, Facebook support groups, and even demonstrated through stickers with phrases like “Military Mom!” and “Proud Army Grandpa”) are not necessarily the most essential identities for first-time military families – and in fact, no first-time military family members mentioned identifying strongly with the stereotypical military labels.

First-time military families also reported a difference in the ideals on which other military families place importance. For example, Javier, the father of a SM, explains that he does not connect with the American ideal of patriotism or pride in the military that seems prevalent in forums for military families he visited :

> I think it was a lot of online, you know, blogs and journals and places where you can read. Obviously there are a lot of people that is going through the same situation. So reading about that, what other parents are thinking…I didn't feel connected to all the comments because, you know, a lot of the comments say, “I'm proud for my son or my daughter.” You know, again that saying, like “she's fighting for our freedom.” So because I didn't agree with that, then it feel like, OK, they use this to make themselves feel good, but I don't know if those people were like, actually crying inside or super worried, because I was, right? So but again right, so you want to be the supportive parent, right?

Here, Javier struggles to relate to other parents of SMs who espouse the ideas of patriotism and military superiority/reliance because he “comes from Venezuela” and thinks that the belief of “Ohh yeah, I am free because of the military” is “a little bit silly even though you know it's a nice slogan because it seemed to imply…that if the military were not fighting for [our] freedom, then we all will not have freedom here in the States, right, which is not true.” He goes on to

justify this thought by explaining how the geography of the United States and its nuclear weapons prevent attacks without needing the military. He admits that as "families …you have this worry, so when you send your kids to the military, you want to believe that they are doing it for a great cause," but it does not fit into his narrative surrounding his support of his daughter serving. For him, this memorable message, an aspect of CTR which can build anticipatory resilience (Boumis et al, 2023) did not help him construct resilience and rather left him uncomfortable in the spaces meant to build community by affirming the military identity.

Enacting Knowledge as a Defense

To background negative emotions, first-time military families utilize knowledge as a method of defense to navigate informational deficit and uncertainty regarding military service (foregrounding productive action). Information is used by these families almost as armor – families who had information were more protected from worry while families who did not felt every instance of uncertainty very viscerally. Valeria, the sister of a SM, states: "Like, once you learn more knowledge, it's like, okay, it's not that – what's the right word – intense." Her brother, Tony, elucidates, "I feel like [not knowing] can be a scary thing…I call it like a scary door, but once it's open, it's not so scary anymore…the more you learn about it, the better it is…the more information available, the better." The families that acquired more knowledge regarding how the military operates were able to reduce *Worries About SM Personal Safety*.

However, this knowledge acquisition came with time and effort on the part of the families. First-time military members typically do not have this "knowledge armor" during their entrance into military life. Delilah, the sister of a SM who explained that the knowledge that her SM would not be in danger on deployment since he was an engineer helped alleviate worries (p.

42), stated when her brother joined the military, her family did not know what to expect or who to go to for acquiring information:

> So there wasn't anyone really to reach out for the things that we didn't know. Because we didn't know anything. I didn't really do much research, because I was still just a kid. I didn't really know what to research or like what to do. And then my mom, even less. I mean, I guess that is like a language barrier thing, but I wouldn't really consider it one since there wasn't anybody to talk to.

Similarly, Quenia, a military spouse originally from Keyna, explains the difficulties of finding information both during the entrance to military life and throughout her husband's service because of her *Cultural Influences*, as well as *Military Terminology*:

> I did not have any feelings. I didn't think of it as anything that would interfere or impact my life because my own experience or lack of with the Kenyan militaries. I don't know what they're doing. I well, I don't even know how many services are in there. Just know there's an army…there was really nothing in my head that could make me realize that the military was gonna play a major role in my life…I'm not ignorant. I can just go online and search some stuff right, but if you don't know that even this stuff exists for you to even start searching for it, you don't even know the word [the military uses]. Why? Why would you even go and look for things like that?

Due to their identities as first-time military family members, Delilah and Quenia had difficulties finding information specifically during their entrance into military life. But it is important to note that this lack of knowledge can follow families throughout their SM's service as well. First-time military families are willing and able to obtain knowledge as a method of backgrounding

negative emotions, but the identity itself can also interrupt this process of building resilience when families do not know the terminology to look for information.

Communicating With and Imagining What Is Happening to The SM

First-time military family members maintained and used communication networks by emphasizing speaking with and writing to their SM. Renata, the mother of a SM, says, "We would talk all the time, actually talk more then than we do now right now living in the same house…It was just basically me and her. We didn't have any more support." Renata emphasizes that the communication between herself and her SM ended up being the only resource she could rely on during her SM's service. Similarly, Delilah, the sister of a SM, expounds:

> I didn't know too much like, how to – so like me, and like my mom, would like mainly lean on each other. And we would just like, because the one thing that like really helped me out was just talking to [my SM]… We didn't speak to anybody from like, the military. [My SM] was the only person we knew.

First-time military family members emphasized the importance of communicating with their SMs as a way of not just improving their mental wellbeing, but also learning information about the military (*Enacting Knowledge as a Defense*).

First-time military families also mentioned the importance of writing letters during basic training to be "supportive, emotionally" (Tony). Each branch differs in their allowance of communication during basic training, but most allow and encourage families to write letters as a main form of communication with their families. [12]Letter writing can become a method of

[12] One branch in particular, the Marine Corps, does not allow their recruits to have their cellphones at all and only allows recruits to communicate with their families through letters.

maintaining communication with their SM that benefits both the SM and the first-time military family member, as Chila (the grandmother of a SM) explains:

> So for me, when you write a letter, you're very close to the person. Now [that practice doesn't] exist. But for me, [it] still exist, you know, and it was important because you're putting your feelings and everything in a piece of paper. And it's important. So with that, I feel happy every time I got the letter, you know, telling me what [she was] doing, how things were going, etc.

Valeria, the sister of a SM, also expresses enjoyment and comfort due to receiving letters from her brother:

> Um, the first few weeks, I mean, the only way I felt like adapting was through letters…I mean, that was like the most exciting part…Yeah, it was just like, you know, you check your mail and it's like, oh my god, I got another!... I still do [have the letters].

For first-time military family members, their focus was on maintaining communication with their SM as a way to acquire knowledge about the military and their SM, often independently of whether they were getting good or bad news.

Although receiving news that their SM was going through a difficult time could be concerning for first-time military family members, they emphasized that receiving no contact from their SMs could be far worse. Communication with SM differs greatly depending on the point in the period of service (e.g., basic training), events the SM is going through (e.g., deployment), and the closeness of the relationship between the SM and the first-time military member already established. For the majority of families, communicating with their SM during basic training/boot camp proved difficult because SMs do not have the same access to their

phones as before and writing letters, which often take days, if not weeks, to reach their destination, can be much slower. Maria, the mother of a SM, explains:

> So I did write everyday and I send them every day, I think… And then nothing was coming nothing was coming and I was going crazy. The first times were very difficult. And then when the first letter arrived saying that [she] was having a bad time, I almost got the car to go and pick [her] up… [But she] wouldn't tell me anything…And I didn't know much. So not knowing makes your head going like crazy…you begin like, Okay, what else is going on in there, you know? And that's the bad part. Because then you are, well at least me, I began making stories… I prefer knowing when the things happen… I understand [her not telling me] because I am exactly the same. Um, I don't want [her] to worry, and, but you know what? By my experience, I can tell you that we worry more. And then we began making stories in our mind, which is even worst.

The lack of communication her SM caused Maria to imagine scenarios that often caused her more worry than comfort, despite Maria's acknowledgment that her daughter was more likely than not trying to protect her mother from issues that she was experiencing.

Some first-time military members, however, used the creation of stories to build resilience in the face of information deficit. For example, Javier, the father of a SM (incidentally the same SM as Maria, mentioned above), describes imagining what his daughter was doing on deployment when he could not communicate as regularly with her for long periods of time:

> [It] was a long deployment. We saw some pictures, so it was nice to see when she was like having some fun in a few places with friends. So you try to imagine what is going on.

> You know, you're hoping that at least she is having some fun time or learning, you know, getting to know new cultures.

The difference between Javier and Maria's responses may lie in timing, as Maria's worries stemmed from a lack of communication in boot camp while Javier's situation was during deployment. The passage of time between boot camp and deployment might suggest that once first-time military families become more acquainted with military life and learn more about the military, they can more easily screen the validity of concerns, but do not remove the possibility of these concerns (such as *Worries About SM Personal Safety*) remaining.

Using Communication Networks

Despite many first-time military family members recognizing their SM as their only or most salient connection to the military, they also found support through other avenues. First-time military family members maintained and used their communication networks by speaking with family, friends, work, and church. Isabella, the mother of a SM, explained how she felt like prayer and her time in church were the only resources she had to help her deal with her son joining and serving in the military. Kate, the wife of a SM, describes how she relied on her family and friends from home for emotional support:

> So I would say, I mostly depend on my family. And I got closer to his family that way. Because, you know, they would call to check on me, you know, like, if he's at work, or, you know, if he was deployed, so definitely family, or I would say, long term friends, meaning like the friends that I had before I moved.

For most first-time military family members interviewed, they relied on the communication networks they felt most familiar. These family members did not find much support in the

programs that already exist for military families (*Employing Cultural Influences and Differences in Ideals* theme).

However, first-time military family members also expanded their communication networks. For example, Quenia created a Facebook group for other foreign-born spouses to find support and share stories or resources (which Lisa later joined and utilized). Quenia also expanded her communication network by finding a new church after having to move to the U.S:

> They would come to my apartment and cook. If they didn't, they would come with food, food that I knew and related to, and I would put it in the fridge and I would be able to eat. So I would say for a huge part of my stay in that state in Delaware, I would say it was really supported by that church and the church members and how they helped me to do certain things that a time when I really, really needed a lot of help. I don't know how I would have survived without. someone like without people like them.

In this instance, Quenia maintains her network as her church allowed her to connect with other individuals from her home country of Kenya (reaffirming an identity anchor) and expanded her network by providing the opportunity to meet new individuals.

However, this expansion of communication networks can also provide conflicts for first-time military family members who are trying to gain an insight into military culture while still maintaining previous communication networks and their identities before becoming first-time military family members. Lisa describes maintaining communication networks she had because of where she was studying and expanding her network by finding new groups when she moved:

> I have a preexisting network in Alabama. So I rely on some of the friends I talked to. I also join the like we were in Fort Hood for the entire year, so I joined like a Fort Hood

> support, Fort Hood military wife or like space?...It's very hard to even initiate new friendship or make new friendship or keep the existing …So I have to divide my time into like two…Spending both time here and then so it's so hard to you knew friendship plus keep the existing one. And so I think it's a little, I think it's very lonely back then.

Although Lisa's difficulties in creating new friendships when she moved is not universal to all first-time military family members as spouses and children are usually the ones who move with the SM, the challenge for first-time military family members to balance both established and new communication networks is more widespread. For example, when Maria, the mother of a SM, expanded her network to include other mothers of SMs, she felt uneasy: "I didn't feel like they were scared, like they wouldn't...I didn't feel like they will understand me." These difficulties can lead first-time military family members to choose between communication networks, and they oftentimes feel most comfortable choosing their already established network.

Focusing on Daily Life and Not Thinking About It

First-time military family members use the CTR processes of crafting normalcy and backgrounding negative emotions while foregrounding productive action, by actively deciding to focus on their daily lives and trying to not think about more difficult memories or concerns. Maria, the mother of a SM, realized the lack of information was causing her to spiral and decided to focus on her job and studies: "Let me work. Let me do something. Let me get busy. I don't want to think, I don't want to think, you know. And I guess it's a way of protecting ourselves, I don't know." Valeria (the sister of a SM), when asked what made it easier to cope when her SM was in the military, responded by saying "I was distracted mostly with school." Javier, the father of a SM, explains: "I kept myself busy. With work and other things right, so I didn't have like

idle time, think like "What do I do" and worry." This process of using distractions to minimize negative emotions has been already seen in military spouses (Villagran et al., 2013).

First-time military family members also block difficult emotions or bad memories to not think about their worries. Javier, when asked about the day his daughter left for boot camp, says:

> I remember there was a ceremony, something that we went as a family there. We took some pictures. I try to remember if that was the day that we say bye because, yeah, I don't remember any other occasion after that, so I don't know if you know, I tend to block like bad memories. So maybe that was a very sad moment, so then I block it.

This avoidance of difficult memories and emotions can also occur when recounting their stories. I have known one of the families I interviewed (Isabella, Valeria, Tony and Alejandro) for years before beginning this study. I first interviewed Valeria, who told her mother Isabella, about the project and how I was looking for participants. Isabella originally decided not to do an interview as even thinking about her SM's time in the military was too emotionally packed for her and she did not feel comfortable talking about her experience.[13] Throughout her interview, Isabella explained that she does not like talking about her thoughts and emotions surrounding her SM's enlistment, and has spent years doing this for the sake of "los chiquitos" – her younger children.

This process highlights the cyclical nature of both first-time military family members' experience and CTR. As family members describe trying to focus on their daily life in the midst of concerns, they do not immediately try to block worries or not think about concerns. Instead, first-time military family members describe an ongoing process of not thinking about worries

[13] I ended up interviewing Isabella due to a conversation between her and Tony, her son. After setting up the interview with Tony, Tony told his mother that since she already knew and trusted me, it might be a good idea to talk through this experience with me as a way to work through her emotions. Isabella sat off to the side while I interviewed Tony, and after hearing a few questions, she told me that she wanted to do the interview.

when issues arise or their emotions become too overwhelming, accepting their circumstances, and having to begin the process again throughout their SMs enlistment.

Anticipatory Resilience and First-Time Military Family Members

Because of my identity as a SM with a first-time military family and a researcher of military communication, there were several underlying assumptions with which I began the project. The first being that, while not an inclusion criterion or necessarily representative of the concept of "first-time military families," some of the individuals I would be interviewing would be originally from other countries. Second, that intersectionality might play a part (at least marginally) in the experiences of these families, whether that be due to the gender of the SM or the family member, the family's socioeconomic class and access to material resources, or cultural differences due to their previous or current nationality. Third, although families can be bonded by blood or circumstance, the families that would be willing to reach out to me were involved in their SM's life enough to have constructed resilience during their SM's entrance into the military and throughout service – that it was a significant enough event, a trigger event, in the first-time military family member's life that it initiated the CTR processes.

However, in the process of speaking with family members and analyzing data, the cyclical nature of being a first-time military family member strongly materialized to me. In this realization, the concept of anticipatory resilience emerged as well. Anticipatory resilience is conceptualized as material resources, narratives, and even messages that are collected before trigger events that can be depended on during disruptions (Boumis et al. 2023). For example, stories that families tell themselves, or others, can be "a system of reasoning about the world, through which they understand the possibility of future normal" (Betts et al., 2022). In a study of COVID-19 related job loss (Wilson et al., 2023), participants responses when asked what lessons

they learned from losing their jobs during a pandemic simultaneously functioned to make sense of the recent past while also project logics (ways of thinking about) the future. In the process of enacting resilience, the "lessons learned" from previous or recent trigger events can also create a sense of optimism for individuals moving forward (Wilson et al., 2023).

For first-time military family members, the process of anticipatory resilience can be impacted in several ways due to lack of preparation, personal and cultural expectations, and the cyclical nature of the identity providing new triggers. First-time military family members are not the SM; they are not the individuals who decide to enlist in the military. For example, Maria, the mother to a first-generation American who joined the Marines, explains, "Anyway, military in Venezuela, which is my country, and military here is completely different, I guess. And I never was in any of them. Either one. So I didn't know. And I was not really interested in the subject. So I never got to, to investigate or anything." Alejandro, the brother of another Marine, talked about how his family didn't really know what to expect when it came to his brother enlisting: "We didn't really know what he was going to go into." Tony, Alejandro's brother, mirrored his feelings by stating, "You don't even know what's going to happen so it's totally something new to me" in regards to their SM (their brother) leaving to boot camp. Kate, the spouse of a SM, even mentioned "I said that I would never marry anyone in the military." First-time military members often do not get the chance to build anticipatory resilience in the same way that the SM does (e.g., by successfully navigating basic training) as they are not the member joining the military. This theme is further explored in the *(Not) Understanding Why SM Joined* theme presented in response to RQ1.

However, even families who do understand why their SM wants to enter the military may still struggle to see their SM go through the military, such as Renata who states about her daughter, who was a SM:

> I was happy for her. A little sad that she was going away, but I was very happy that she was gonna find a purpose and some guidance. At least that's what I expected… After graduating boot camp, things changed with the things she kept telling me about the Marines, and how they treat women. And I changed to worry, I was happy, but worried… I talked to her as much as I could, and tried to give her advice, how to stay out of situations that would be bad for her.

For Renata, thinking that the military might provide a sense of purpose for her daughter did not prepare her for her daughter's experiences of misogyny and sexual harassment in the service. In response, she relied on processes (e.g., maintaining communication networks by offering advice to her daughter) she had established with her daughter far before her daughter's time in the military. Her positive expectations regarding the military worked against her building anticipatory resilience for her daughter's time in the military in this instance.

Moreover, first-time military family members struggle to build anticipatory resilience because they do not know what to expect, or *Employing Cultural Influences* they have from the militaries in their countries of origin work against them. For example, Javier mentions:

> Actually, you know, I did have a preconceived vision from Venezuela, where I live 20 years They say that because over there at that time, Venezuela was good, had money, right. So you have, you were able to study, you have a good future, right?…In Venezuela it was seen that, ohh. You go to the military because there is nothing else you can do

> because, you know, university was free [in Venezuela]. You have all these wonderful opportunities, right? So, why will you choose, you know, this?...A military career in Venezuela wasn't something like to be proud of.

These expectations can interfere with the process of constructing a first-time military family member's anticipatory resilience when utilized as the starting point for the family member's viewpoint of the military since differing (in this case, negative) expectations might discourage them from learning about specific assistance that the U.S. military provides. The military provides a plethora of assistance for SMs, their dependents, and veterans – ranging from education benefits for SMs, veterans, and their dependents to disability (monthly monetary compensation) that the government provides to SMs for service-related injuries. In the case of Javier, he did not know that these benefits were a possibility because he built his idea of "military" based on the military in Venezuela, a country where education is provided free of charge. In the U.S., that is not the case; SMs join for a variety of reasons, one of which is the education benefit (e.g., Post 9/11 G.I. Bill) that pays for university for SMs (Woodruff et al., 2006).

In conjunction with expectations due to nationality, first-time military family members also have other expectations that can work against them. Javier, the father of a SM, describes that on top of the ideals that he had from Venezuela, he felt that he was given unrealistic expectations from his daughters' recruiter:

> I remember being those conversations, where they promote a lot of the education part. So that was, I was happy to hear about that. Didn't seem very realistic, and later on found out that was very unrealistic. They mention, "Ohh yeah that you can study you can you know do this, that, take courses like that." But definitely once you are in there in there it seems

> like almost impossible to get like a masters or finish your school while you are, you know, in the military itself.

Knowing that education was an important value for Javier, his daughter's recruiter emphasized how the military would provide funds while his daughter was enlisted. Only later did Javier and his daughter realize how difficult going to college classes would be while having a full-time job (that occurred when most colleges offered classes) and possibly having to leave on deployment in the middle of a semester. Family members also reported they did built expectations of what the military would be like from the media, such as Valeria (the sister of a SM) stating that most of her worries about her brother joining stemmed from the military movies she watched. The informational deficit that first-time military family members face regarding the true nature of military life prompts them to rely on beliefs formed from sources that do not always have the family's mental well-being as a priority – a recruiter's focus is convincing individuals to join, and military movies often glamourize, exaggerate, and romanticize the lives of SMs.

Once first-time military family members have already been military families for a while and start to acquire resources and narratives to help them navigate their SM's time in service, new disruptions, most noticeably deployment, cause new worries and challenges for first-time military family members. Javier, whose daughter deployed once during her time in service, says:

> I think that that the beginning, it's a little bit of a shock then just thinking about it, then you start, you know, worrying and then probably you accept and you know, try to find out more information. More details…[But when she was] deploying, the worry doesn't go at that time…I didn't feel that it got easier. I think it was a continuous state of alert during all that time when she was, you know, deployed.

Similarly, Kate, the spouse of a SM, says:

> Yeah, when he deployed I mean, you know, it really makes makes things real because you don't see him every day to know if he's okay. You don't always get a phone call. Yeah. Yeah, I think it's definitely different. Yeah, but I think I honestly think even more real for me.

For many first-time military families, although they build anticipatory resilience throughout their SM's time in the military, new disruptions, like deployment, can cause the process to be interrupted (*Worries About SM Personal Safet*y theme). Acquiring information about military life and military processes helps these families build anticipatory resilience (*Enacting Knowledge as a Defense* theme) but is not necessarily a complete safeguard for these families in terms of all trigger events prevalent in military life.

First-time military families build anticipatory resilience in many ways, from acquiring information (*Enacting Knowledge as a Defense*) to constructing narratives surrounding the benefits their SMs receive from enlisting (*(Not) Understanding Why SM Joined* and *Seeing How The Military Affects Their SM*). However, in the process of first-time military families' resilience, it is also important to note that not do family members rely on processes built before the SM's enlistments (such as bonds and communication networks established when the SM was a child), but that these processes can oftentimes work against them – such as the case of cultural and societal expectations. The anticipatory resilience first-time military family members build is a continuous process, from *before* their SM's entrance into the military to *beyond* their SM's exit from service. These examples show that first-time military family members have the capacity to build anticipatory resilience, but also face ongoing challenges in doing so.

Lastly, the process of first-time military families constructing anticipatory resilience for their own SM's time in the military leaves many of these family members hesitant to recommend the military to others in their lives. Delilah, the sister of a SM, explains, "I feel like I would feel a little like worried for them, especially if they didn't know anything that was going on" if a friend of hers would want to go into the military. Isabella, the mother of a SM, states that if a friend of hers had a son who wanted to go into the military, she would tell her friend to "no lo dejaria" [Translation: "Don't let him go"]. Although first-time military families can amass resources and narratives to help them cope with their SM's service, they do not necessarily build a sense of hope or optimism that would prompt them to recommend military service to others in their lives.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

The disruptions first-time military families face are not all unique to first-time military families. Family members being concerned about their SMs personal safety is a concern that many military families have, whether they have previous experience with the military or not (Bartone, 2015, p, 193; Basinger & Knobloch, 2018). However, these concerns can be uniquely exacerbated for first-time military family members when accompanied by not knowing who to ask for information, what terms to use to ask for support or connect with others, or what to expect during certain periods in their SM's military service. Additionally, for some first-time military family members, such as foreign-born spouses as opposed to spouses who are born in the U.S., certain events (such as military relocation of families) can be exacerbated by not knowing the country or the language, or having limited opportunity to utilize their existing support as their families are several time zones away. These disruptions can cause first-time military family members to struggle to find comradery in military support programs and structures that are already in place to assist military families.

My two research questions sought to examine how first-time military family members' lives may be disrupted (emotionally, physically, financially) when they have no prior experience with military life and to understand how first-time military families (struggle to) enact resilience having no previous experience with the military. First-time military family members suggested that not understanding military terminology, service progression, and why their SM enlisted – as well as the presence of worries about their SM's safety, material disruptions, and observing how

the military affects their SM – are all disruptions to the process of enacting their resilience (RQ1). Participants used all five CTR processes within their experience and established that despite these processes, first-time military families faced situations where these processes failed them (RQ2). First-time military family members also demonstrated that the building of anticipatory resilience is an ongoing process during their SM's enlistment, but one that has challenges in doing so that result in first-time military family members lacking optimism about serving in the military.

This project found evidence of themes already present in the study of military families. For example, the idea of deployment being a time of possible turbulence for both SMs and their families (Bartone, 2015; Dorrance-Hall et al., 2023; Houston et al., 2013; Knobloch et al., 2021) as well as how not all military spouses feel welcomed in spaces meant to develop community between spouses (Parcell & Maguire, 2014). However, this project finds that these issues impact how first-time military family members cope with military life in multifaceted ways, such as relying on processes established before the SM's military service or affirming cultural identity anchors to handle challenges. This reliance proves necessary for first-time military families because they do not know what to expect when their SM joins or have cultural influences that can work against them.

Additionally, this project emphasizes the importance of some identities over others. Although this sample is too small to make generalizations for the entire group, there are indications that some intersections, such as the culture/nationality of the first-time military family, are more salient to these families' enactment of (and struggles to enact) resilience than others, such as the gender of the SM. Themes such as *(Not) Understanding Why SM Joined* and

Employing Cultural Influences and Differences in Ideals suggest that first-time military families place importance on their culture above most other identities.

Contribution to CTR

As a whole, this project demonstrates the utility of CTR as a sensitizing framework for analyzing how first-time military families (struggle to) build resilience. My findings reinforce the cyclical nature of constructing resilience and mirror how interconnected the processes can be with one another. The most salient contribution of this study to the existing framework of CTR is the idea of subversion of the resilience processes to build resilience. First-time military family members have a complex relationship with affirming identity anchors. Although they do reaffirm some identity anchors, such as those regarding their identity as a citizen of their country of origin (Vietnam, Venezuela, Kenya) or their families, they often reject the identity anchors concerning being part of the military community or even being an American. This results in a rejection of the military identities that potentially might provide support and communities of individuals who are expected to understand what these family members experience under the guise of being a "military family." Instead, first-time military family members reaffirm their cultural identities by rejecting their military identities to enact resilience.

Furthermore, first-time military families connect the concepts of anticipatory resilience and alternative logics. First-time military family members did not build anticipatory resilience in a manner that engendered optimism – or at least optimism as a sense of hope or belief in the military. Instead, first-time military family members focused on *survival* – building and maintaining communication networks, acquiring knowledge, and reaffirming identities – and providing strength for their SMs, all of which helped them adapt to their SM's time in the military. The current framework situates anticipatory resilience, in part, as a way to generate

hope and confidence (Boumis et al, 2023; Wilson et al., 2023). However, the process of first-time military family members' anticipatory resilience adds a dimension to the concept of anticipatory resilience as families navigate the idea that despite the benefits the military provides (e.g. discipline, purpose, financial/education assistance), the military as an institution takes far more than it gives to their SMs. In this negotiation, first-time military families reject hope and confidence in the military serving their SMs with the same intensity the military asks of their SMs (and by extension, their families) and instead focus on providing that level of devotion themselves.

Practical Implications

This study highlights the importance of making space for individuals who do not essentially fit the mold of those we aim to reach – whether in research or social justice campaigns and support programs. First-time military family members pointed out that they had not previously given much thought to the entirety of their experiences (from SM entrance to exit), and moreover, had "never been asked any of these questions" (Kate). Parents, in particular, expressed that it "was nice to have somebody like was willing to hear what a parent, you know, I had to say in this situation" (Javier) because they did not feel they had the opportunity to express their concerns to the military. First-time military family members also emphasized that the process of going through their experiences gave them the space to recognize that their viewpoint is not necessarily their SM's point of view, and led family members to posit the idea of having further conversations with their SM.

The importance of exploring family narratives to process military life is a longstanding and powerful method for supporting our military families. For example, the FOCUS Family Resilience Program, which began in 2008, uses a "narrative sharing process" for parents in the

military and their children, and focuses on flexibility to make the programs customizable to each family's specific needs (such as how many sessions families need to go to; Saltzman, 2016). This process includes each family member sharing their story independently and then coming together to "shar[e] family members' narratives and [address] their differences in experiences and interpretations" (Saltzman, 2016, p. 653). The combination of honoring both individual and familial narratives can be a tool in reducing negative emotions and helping family members cope with military life.

The benefits of this method of intervention come not only from the literature (Saltzman, 2016), but from my own experience throughout this study. For this project, I interviewed some of my own family members as they are first-time military family members. I joined the military 10 years ago and transitioned out 5 years ago. I had a clear narrative of what my military service meant for myself and how it affected my family, and I already had examined parts of my time in service as a researcher studying communication. My family is close, and I had the impression that we had talked through our experiences throughout my time in the military because we kept in contact the entire 5 years. To be frank, I was incorrect. The structure of having interview questions, the opportunity to hear my family members' story from beginning to end without correcting events or terminology or inputting my own viewpoint, prompted further conversation between us as a family and helped me see past my own (admittedly narrow) perspective.

The interview process and participants also stressed the importance of customized and unique support throughout military service for both SMs and their families. Participants demonstrated a diversity of experience for military families – and even within the concept of first-time military families (e.g. foreign-born spouses) – which is demonstrated by the *Employing Cultural Influences and Differences in Ideals* theme. One participant mentioned that having

different support groups for individuals of different ages and circumstances in life could be helpful in building community instead of lumping family members by family role (e.g. wives, mothers) or location. First-time military families also demonstrated that not all trigger events are triggers for all first-time military families *((Not) Understanding Why SM Joined* and *Seeing How the Military Affects Their SM*) and so employing interventions that have flexibility based on family needs already built into the program is salient for these programs to help their intended targets.

Support for first-time military families should be structural rather than individual (Ahn, et al., 2021). Currently, it seems like most of the responsibility of supporting and educating first-time military family members falls on the SM themselves, as they are part of the family and often who first-time military family members feel most comfortable going to for information. There are multitudes of programs already set up by the military, the government, academia, veterans, and civilians for military families, but we are letting families fall in between the cracks in that existing support. As one participant, Quenia, stated:

> The surveys every year where the DoD collects information and all that is really important to figure out the needs of the population that they need to serve. But they're not collecting the right data. For example, if they knew that I was a foreign-born spouse, then they would have asked what do I need cause my needs are very unique to the ones that they offer other spouses…There's so many organizations out here that are also trying to meet needs, but they don't have data on, for example, foreign-born spouses, because they do not collect that data, so they need to collect that data. You cannot serve who you don't know and who you don't know, [you don’t know] their needs.

First-time military families could greatly benefit from programs that take into consideration language barriers, lack of knowledge of existing programs and military terminology that can help family members find those programs, and the inclusion of multiple types of experiences.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations that could inspire further research. Although the 12 participants interviewed provided a solid basis to begin research into this type of military family, it is still a small sample. Future research could be done with a larger sample size to determine if there are overarching themes based on the culture or family position of the first-time military family member. Larger sample sizes that are also more diverse in terms of demographics would be beneficial for this work to account for the experiences of groups, such as dual-military couples or families with LGTBQ+ partners, to investigate how these identities interact with or affect their experience. There are also three military branches left out of this research (Navy, Coast Guard, and Space Force) that would bring value to this research.

Moreso than increasing sample size or diversity within the sample, this research could benefit from interviewing more than one family member in each family. Although I was able to reach out to multiple family members in some cases, for five of the seven SMs attached to first-time military family members, I was only able to interview one family member. The inclusion of multiple viewpoints of the same SM's service can illustrate how family roles interact with the resilience processes. In the same vein, interviewing the SM as well as first-time military family members can provide a holistic view of how the family itself constructs resilience.

This research could also be improved by doing a longitudinal qualitative interview study to check in with families throughout service. It was often difficult for family members to

remember specific sequences of events (although they could clearly remember how those events made them feel, which was salient for this project). Since being a first-time military family member is a process, a longitudinal study might help track how disruptions and resilience evolve throughout service as events occur. A longer study might also provide a better chance for familiarization between the researcher and the participant as this is a highly sensitive subject for many. In sum, a longitudinal study could help both researchers and participants delve deeper into certain themes.

Conclusion

First-time military family members are a group that exists within the construct of military families and how they enact resilience. Like other military families, they experience concern about their SM's wellbeing, challenges with deployment, and uncertainty. However, first-time military family members are also a group who destabilize the assumptions we have placed on who is included within a military family (e.g., siblings, grandparents), how military families find support (e.g., not knowing who to reach out to for support or not finding adequate support within existing programs) and what military families consider most important to cope with their SMs time in service (e.g., their family roles and cultural identities vs. military identities). First-time military family members demonstrate that informational deficits, worries about their SM's safety, material disruptions, and witnessing how the military affects their SM are all disruptions to how they enact their resilience and prove that despite utilizing the resilience processes, they still encounter situations where these processes work against them. The stories and experiences of first-time military families provide us with the opportunity to highlight voices that need to be heard – not just for the value they have to military support programs or communication researchers, but for the lessons of reflexivity and resilience they impart.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW GUIDE (ENGLISH)

Opening

1. Thank you for taking the time. Does today still work?
2. Screening questions:
    a. 18 years of age or older
    b. live in the United States
    c. speak English or Spanish
    d. SMs or military veterans of first-time military families must have entered the service less than 20 years ago, served active duty for at least six months, and been in the military for at least three years
    e. Consent form questions?
3. This interview will take anywhere from 40 minutes to an hour and a half. You can stop the interview at any time and you can also not answer any question(s) you would like.
4. I will be recording the interview, do you consent?
5. We will be talking about your experience as a first-time military family member: no close family members (grandparents, parents/parental figures, siblings, aunts/uncles, first cousins, nieces/nephews) or other loved ones – such as close family friends – who have joined the military while that family member has been alive and have served at least three years, no or minimal background information on military terminology or service progression, and not having a support system already set up with knowledge of the military.

a. Does this term make sense to you? Do you think a different term might make more sense?

6. This is a conversation, so please feel free to stop me or ask any questions to clarify what I am asking at any time. Please feel free to ask me to repeat questions as well.
7. Feel free to express yourself as you wish and explain things as much or as little as you like. Although I am a SM, feel free to speak to me like you were talking to someone who does not already know the situation, because I do not know the situation from your side.
8. I will be using a pseudonym (fake name) for you in my study. Would you like to choose your own or would you like me to assign one?
9. [Demographic/Background Questions] Please tell me a little about:
    a. Yourself
        i. Name/Age
        ii. Race
        iii. Nationality – amount of time in the US
        iv. Gender
        v. Relation to SM
    b. Your family
        i. Race
        ii. Nationality – amount of time in the US
        iii. Gender
    c. Your SM
        i. Name/Age at Entrance
        ii. Race

iii. Nationality – amount of time in the US

iv. Gender

v. branch

vi. time in

vii. status (active/reserve)

viii. number of deployments

Interview Questions

1. Please tell me about your experience of finding out that your SM wanted to go into the military.
    a. How old were you/your SM or how long ago was this?
    b. What thoughts or emotions do you remember having when you found out that they wanted to enlist?
    c. Do you have any specific memories tied to that moment?
    d. Amended question for spouses who were married and involved in military life after their spouse joined the military: Please tell me about your experience of finding out that your SM was in the military? How old were you/your SM or how long ago was this? Do you have any specific memories tied to that moment?
2. How, if at all, did the emotions/worries/thoughts you have change between the time you found out your SM was enlisting and when your SM left for boot camp/basic training?
3. Please tell me about the day your SM left for boot camp/basic training. You can paint me a mental picture if you'd like.
    a. How did you feel and what did you do? Include thoughts, smells, emotions (or anything else) if you would like or remember them.

    b. Amended question for spouses who were married and involved in military life after their spouse joined the military: Please tell me about the day you joined your spouse in the military (living in military housing or coming over from another country to join them in the U.S.). You can paint me a mental picture if you'd like

4. How were those first weeks/months that your SM was in the military like for you? How did you try to adapt to the new situation?
5. Was your experience finding out your SM was deploying different than finding out they wanted to enlist in the [SM's branch of service]?
    a. If SM did not deploy, ask about a specific major event/change in their service (job change, training exercise, promotion) instead. Otherwise, skip the question.
    b. Amended question for spouses who were married and involved in military life after their spouse joined the military: Was your experience finding out your SM was deploying different than finding out they were in the [SM's branch of service]?
6. How long did your SM serve? Did your experience as a military family member change in that time?
    a. What made it easier to cope during your SM's time in?
    b. What made it challenging or difficult to adjust?
7. How did you find support while your SM was in the military? Did you build a network or rely on the support you already had?
8. What resources did you use when your SM was in the service?
    a. Ex: prayer, military programs, etc

9. Based on your own experience, what advice would you give the U.S. military about how they can better support families like yours when their loved one joins the military?
10. Imagine one of your friends had a [age]-year-old [SM family position] who wanted to enlist in the [SM branch].
    a. How would you feel?
    b. What would you tell them?
    c. Would you have any advice?

Closing

1. Is there anything you would like to say about your experience that you have not had the chance to yet?
2. Are there any questions you wished I had asked you?
3. Is there anything you would like to ask me?
4. What did you feel was the most important thing/aspect of today's interview?
5. Thank you for our conversation today. Your experiences and voice are important. Please reach out to me if you have any concerns.
    a. Resources for military families here as well (Links to Military OneSource, Wounded Warrior, Warrior Scholar Project can be sent to the participant)

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW GUIDE (SPANISH)

Preguntas Iniciales

- Gracias por hablar conmigo hoy. ¿Hoy todavía funciona?
- Preguntas de entranda:
    - 18 años de edad o más
    - vives en los Estados Unidos (E.E.U.U)
    - hablas inglés o español
    - Los MM (miembro militar) o veteranos militares de familias militares por primera vez deben haber ingresado al servicio hace menos de 20 años, haber servido en servicio activo durante al menos seis meses y haber estado en el ejército durante al menos tres años.
    - ¿Preguntas sobre el formulario de consentimiento?
- Esta entrevista durará entre 40 minutos y una hora y media. Puede detener la entrevista en cualquier momento y tampoco tiene que responder ninguna pregunta que no desea.
- Estaré grabando la entrevista, ¿estás de acuerdo?
- Hablaremos sobre su experiencia como familiar militar por primera vez: no hay familiares cercanos (abuelos, padres/figuras paternas, hermanos, tías/tíos, primos hermanos, sobrinas/sobrinos) u otros seres queridos, como familiares cercanos. amigos de la familia: que se han unido al ejército mientras ese miembro de la familia estaba vivo y han servido al menos tres años, información mínima o nula sobre terminología militar o

progresión del servicio, y no tener un sistema de apoyo ya establecido con conocimiento del ejército.

    - ¿Tiene sentido este término para usted? ¿Crees que un término diferente podría tener más sentido?

- Esta es una conversación, así que no dudes en detenerme o hacer cualquier pregunta para aclarar lo que estoy preguntando en cualquier momento. No dude en pedirme que repita las preguntas también.
- Siéntete libre de expresarte como quieras y explicar las cosas tanto como quieras. Aunque soy un MM, no dudes en hablarme como si estuvieras hablando con alguien que aún no conoce la situación, porque yo no conozco la situación por tu parte.
- Usaré un alias (nombre falso) para usted en mi estudio. ¿Quieres elegir el tuyo o quieres que te asigne uno?
- [Preguntas demográficas/antecedentes] Por favor, cuénteme un poco sobre:
    - usted mismo
        - Nombre/Edad
        - Nacionalidad – cantidad de tiempo en los EE.UU.
        - Género
        - Relación con MM
    - Tu familia
        - Nacionalidad – cantidad de tiempo en los EE.UU.
        - Género
    - Tu MM
        - Nombre/Edad al momento de la entrada

- Carrera
- Nacionalidad – cantidad de tiempo en los EE.UU.
- Género
- Rama militar
- tiempo en
- estado (activo/reserva)
- cuantos despliegues

Preguntas de Entrevista

- Por favor, cuénteme sobre su experiencia al descubrir que su MM quería ingresar al ejército.
    - Cuántos años tenía usted/su MM o hace cuánto tiempo fue esto?
    - ¿Qué pensamientos o emociones recuerdas haber tenido cuando supiste que querían alistarse?
    - ¿Tiene algún recuerdo específico relacionado con ese momento?
- ¿Cómo cambiaron, si es que cambiaron, las emociones/preocupaciones/pensamientos que tienes entre el momento en que descubriste que tu MM se estaba alistando y cuando tu SM se fue al campo de entrenamiento/entrenamiento básico?
- Por favor, cuéntame sobre el día en que tu MM se fue al campamento de entrenamiento/entrenamiento básico. Puedes pintarme una imagen mental si quieres.
    - ¿Cómo te sentiste y qué hiciste? Incluye pensamientos, olores, emociones (o cualquier otra cosa) si quieres o los recuerdas.
- ¿Cómo fueron para ti esas primeras semanas/meses en los que tu MM estuvo en el ejército? ¿Cómo intentaste adaptarte a la nueva situación?

- ¿Fue su experiencia al enterarse de que su MM se estaba lleyendo en despliegue diferente a la de enterarse de que querían alistarse en [la rama de servicio de MM]?
    - Si MM no se fue en despliegue, pregunte sobre un evento/cambio importante específico en su servicio (cambio de trabajo, ejercicio de capacitación, promoción). Si no hay, omita la pregunta.
- ¿Cuánto tiempo sirvió su MM? ¿Cambió su experiencia como familiar militar en ese tiempo?
    - ¿Qué hizo que fuera más fácil sobrellevar la situación durante el tiempo que estuvo MM?
    - ¿Qué hizo que fuera desafiante o difícil adaptarse?
- ¿Cómo encontraste apoyo mientras tu MM estaba en el ejército? ¿Construiste una red o confiaste en el apoyo que ya tenías?
- ¿Qué recursos utilizaste cuando tu MM estaba en el servicio?
    - Ej: oración, programas militares, etc.
- Según su propia experiencia, ¿qué consejo le daría al ejército de los EE. UU. sobre cómo pueden apoyar mejor a familias como la suya cuando su ser querido se une al ejército?
- Imagina que uno de tus amigos tuviera un [puesto familiar MM] de [edad] años que quisiera alistarse en la [rama military de MM].
    - ¿Cómo te sentirías?
    - ¿Qué les dirías?
    - ¿Tendrías algún consejo?

Clausura

- ¿Hay algo que quisieras decir sobre tu experiencia y que aún no hayas tenido la oportunidad de decir?
- ¿Hay alguna pregunta que desearías que te hubiera hecho?
- ¿Hay algo que quieras preguntarme?
- ¿Qué cree que fue el aspecto/cosa más importante de la entrevista de hoy?

APPENDIX C: IRB EXEMPT DETERMINATION LETTER

UNIVERSITY of SOUTH FLORIDA

EXEMPT DETERMINATION

December 5, 2023

Steven Wilson
CIS 3048
4202 E Fowler Ave
Tampa, FL 33620

Dear Steven Wilson:

On 12/4/2023, the IRB reviewed and approved the following protocol:

Application Type:	Initial Study
IRB ID:	STUDY006386
Review Type:	Exempt 2
Title:	Disruptions in the Experiences of First-Time Military Family Members (FTMFM)
Protocol:	• IRB application FTMFM.docx;

The IRB determined that this protocol meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review.

In conducting this protocol, you are required to follow the requirements listed in the INVESTIGATOR MANUAL (HRP-103).

Please note, as per USF policy, once the exempt determination is made, the application is closed in BullsIRB. This does not limit your ability to conduct the research. Any proposed or anticipated change to the study design that was previously declared exempt from IRB oversight must be submitted to the IRB as a new study prior to initiation of the change. However, administrative changes, including changes in research personnel, do not warrant a modification or new application.

Ongoing IRB review and approval by this organization is not required. This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these activities impact the exempt determination, please submit a new request to the IRB for a determination.

Sincerely,

Jennifer Walker
IRB Manager