

Research Paper

Exploring The Emotional Experiences of Indian Military Wives During Multiple and Prolonged Deployment/ Field Area Posting Induced Separation

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the emotions experienced by Indian military wives during deployment/ field posting induced separation and to gain insight into how they made sense of this experience. In-depth interviews were conducted with 24 military wives whose husbands were deployed field areas, in order to get a deeper understanding of their lives. Thematic analysis of the interviews revealed emotional distancing and feelings of anxiety, tension, anger, guilt, ambiguity through different phases of deployment. Military wives made use of several digressive meaning making methods like acceptance, faith in God and destiny, drawing comparisons and several other ways, to make sense of multiple and prolonged separation experience.

Keywords: *Indian Military Wives, Deployment, Emotions, Meaning making*

Military families are a unique population and the most prominent issue making them unique is that the military member is absent from the family unit in both the long and short term for deployment, temporary duty assignments, and frequent trainings (Lowe, Adams, Browne & Hinkle, 2012). Deployments not only impose a significant practical and emotional burden on family members but also can be an overwhelming process for the at-home spouse, as she deals with loneliness, loss of emotional support, pressure of an extensive separation, shifting responsibilities, potential difficulty in dealing with the children, financial constraints, and constant disruption of family roles (Johnson, et al., 2007; Gambardella, 2008). In addition to these challenges, the military member may be deployed to a combat zone where his life is continuously at risk. Literature reflects that both wives and husbands of deployed soldiers exhibit different stages of grief and loss, including denial, anger, bargaining depression, and acceptance (Warner, Appenzeller, Warner, & Grieger, 2009). Other significant emotional problems, such as anxiety (Mansfield, et al, 2010; Steel Fisher, Zaslavsky & Blendon, 2008) and relationship dysfunction (Johnson, et al, 2007) along with related health problems may occur. Returning home is also a particularly stressful time for the family, since they must deal with reintegrating the member into the family. The Emotional Cycle of Deployment is a model that was developed for Naval families by

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Kathleen Vestal Logan in 1987 and published in Proceedings Magazine. Since then, ECOD model has been referred to, for understanding the phases and transitions that military families undergo in order to determine the most effective intervention strategies during different phases of deployment.

Pincus and colleagues (2001) discuss five stages of deployment: **Pre-deployment** includes the time between the warning order of deployment and the actual deployment from the home base (Time frame-first month). **Deployment** involves the initial period that service members are stationed away from home (Time frame-first month). The **Sustainment** phase is the main portion of time spent away (Time frame-months 2 thru 5), and the **Re-deployment** phase is the final month before the service member is scheduled to return to home base (Time frame-months 5 thru 6). Finally, **Post-deployment** (3 to 6 months) after deployment is the initial period upon return to the home station. Further each phase is associated with unique stressors and emotions for families. For example, during the pre-deployment phase, families may experience stress and confusion. Feelings of shock and disbelief as well as worry around the pending departure and resulting life changes are common. Intense feelings about deployment may begin to fade and the emotional impact of the service members departure becomes salient during deployment phase. Families may struggle with feelings of loss, grief, and fear, while also taking on new duties and routines. The re-unification phase may initially be associated with feelings of extreme joy, but fades into mixed emotions for some families. Family members may have trouble re-connecting and adjusting to changes in roles, routines, and responsibilities. Despite the lack of empirical evidence, the model provides valuable insight into better understanding the time frame and emotional challenges experienced by military families.

The point of departure for the Indian deployment scenario is the duration and cyclic nature of deployment. The Indian military has continued to be deployed and redeployed along the borders to protect the Indian mainland against the hostile neighbourhood. Field area postings of the Indian military within the country are basically either in intense counterterrorist operational areas or border guarding tenures and may last from two to two and a half years. Sometimes the deployment of a soldier may continue for two successive tenures, thus moving from one field area posting to another. Besides this the Indian Armed forces are required to contribute to United Nations peacekeeping missions, the tenure of which may be 6 months to 1 year. In peace stations exercises lasting 3 months are conducted every consecutive year besides deployment due to internal disturbances and natural calamities, whose duration may depend on the exigencies of the situation.

Considering that deployment is a stressful experience for the deploying soldier as well as the entire family and that it is a given for an Indian soldier, it is imperative that this significant challenging event in the lives of Indian military families be researched in detail. The majority of military families successfully manage new ways to maintain family life during the period of separation. While the ECOD framework provides a useful tool for understanding what may change for families as they progress along the deployment cycle, there is little research to validate or generalize this model for Indian military families. This research aims to explore the same keeping in perspective the Indian deployments scenario.

Most military families are able to navigate through these challenges showing resilience. Meaning making plays a central role in the process of adjusting to and coping with stressful situations. In addition to maintaining self-worth and pre-established worldviews (Davis &

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Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001; Davis, Nolen- Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998), meaning making involves changing the appraisals of the traumatic experience in order to reduce the discrepancy between this situational meaning and pre-established worldviews (Park & Blumberg, 2002). It also involves seeking perceived benefits including, but not limited to, growth in character, gain in perspective, and a strengthening of relationships (Lehman et al., 1993; Davis & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2001). So, the way people interpret and make sense of their life events can help them adapt and grow through their realities even when they are stressful and traumatic.

For this purpose, not only the emotions experienced during the entire deployment duration were investigated but effort was also directed towards comprehending how the military wives made sense of the multiple and prolonged separations for themselves.

Objectives/ research questions

The study being exploratory in nature was conducted with two objectives,

- a) To explore the various emotional experiences (feelings they experience) of the military wives (with prior experience of separation) during the various stages of deployment.
- b) To identify the ways in which they make sense of their experience with spousal deployments?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

Military wives in the midst of spousal deployment are a sensitive population. Hence recruiting them for this study was difficult and needed to be handled sensitively. 24 military wives, staying in Allahabad military station, whose husbands were deployed in field areas participated in the study. Since the inclusion criteria was clearly established, cases were hard to find and there was reluctance to be a part of the study. Snowball sampling facilitated the identification of hard-to-find cases. Military wives who were going through their second, third or fourth spousal deployment ($M=2$) were included. The age of these women ranged from 25 to 43 years ($M= 31.7$ yrs.). Care was taken to include wives of all ranks of PBORs (Persons Below Officer Rank) and Officers (up to the rank of Colonel) across services.

Data collection Procedure

Semi structured interviews were conducted. Participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses. Each interview started with a few broad questions stated above and probes were used to gather more information. Debriefing of the participants was done since the study explored sensitive emotions Also, the contact number and email id of the researcher was shared with the participants for any later assistance. A semi structured interview schedule was prepared in advance to proceed through the interviews.

- 1) What did you feel when you came to know about your husbands' deployment?
- 2) As you go through this period of spousal deployment, what difficulties are you facing? What are your feelings about the challenges you have?
- 3) What is your experience after the field posting ends and you begin to stay together again?
- 4) What do you think of / how do you understand deployments/field area postings?

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Data Analysis:

After transcribing, a thematic analysis of the data was done. Line by line approach was used for the analysis by two researchers individually and simultaneously and then codes were matched to establish inter – coder reliability. Core categories were identified and sub categories were developed after reaching a consensus.

RESULT

Result is presented in three categories i.e. emotions experienced in the phases of pre-deployment, during deployment and post deployment. During the interviews, military wives kept going back and forth about their previous experiences since all of them had gone through at least one prior deployment separation. The fourth category of the result presents the discursive meaning making themes that emerged from the interviews.

Pre deployment

Responding to the first question about their initial reactions and feelings at the first hint of their husband's field posting, wives recalled feeling '*sad*', '*upset*', '*tense*' and '*a little scared at the thought of living alone*'. They reported that despite having experienced separation earlier due to the cyclic nature of deployments, their emotional experience at this stage was similar to the first one.

'You never get used to field postings...'

Deployment to a highly active field area added to their tension and anxiety at this stage. As the time for departure came closer military wives reported experiencing an **emotional distancing** not only within their own selves but also from their partners.

They illustrated how getting household affairs in order before the military spouse leaves impinges upon the couple's emotional bonding adding to the stress of pending separation. '*we just forget to talk about each other at times...the only things we remember are household requirements and kids and how all this will be managed*'.

The narrations illustrated that wives understood how separation was equally difficult for both the spouses, '*Ghar se door rehna bhi utna hi muskil hai jitna gharwaale se door rehna.*'

Deployment

In responding to the query about challenges and feelings after the military member leaves, wives revealed profound and complex negative experience full of taxing emotions. Some of the prominent and recurring emotions found in the analysis have been described below. Closely related emotions have been presented together.

Loneliness, Helplessness and Disappointment

At the core of deployment experience was a powerful general feeling of aloneness which could be attributed to the absence of the partner.

'Akelapan mehsoos hota hai (one feels lonely)

The analysis of the narratives revealed the feeling of loneliness felt by the wives in several contexts for e.g., women also felt lonely as they carry on with their household chores and additional care giving responsibilities all by themselves.

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Also noted was a feeling of helplessness as women found themselves in situations, they could not handle by themselves,

Disappointment was felt by the military wives in several contexts which varied from lack of recognition from the husband who questioned *'what work do you have'*, a non-understanding attitude of extended family members especially the in-laws *'Nirasha hoti hai par theek hai chalta hai.'* An indifferent attitude of the civilians where wives felt *'Our sacrifices they are not even aware of nor are they bothered'*.

Lack of any specific organizational support was also expressed as a source of disappointment, *'...I mean there is nothing like something is being done especially for us because our husbands are away in field.'*

Anger and Irritation

Anger and irritation are closely related and are the feelings that most commonly surface in relatives. Some expressed anger at being put in this situation where they had to go through multiple separations. *'...I was not aware that this will keep happening every two years.'* Military wives also expressed anger at not been given due attention by the organization.

'In peace stations they say we are a family. Where is the family?'

Irritation, a state of being annoyed or impatient was a commonly used expression by the wives during the interview.

'I feel irritated a lot. Even little things irritate me. There are so many things running in the mind at the same time',

Resentment

Military wives who were overburdened with single parenting responsibilities and battling additional stressful events simultaneously expressed a lot of irritation and anger often also culminating into resentment *'..mere man mein kunthha bahut bhar gayi hai'* Feelings of deep bitterness and anger were expressed by wives who had been looking after family members with prolonged illness. *'I do everything but deep down I feel very very angry.'*

Military wives who had undergone multiple deployments also expressed their resentment as they felt unhappy about the long-term impact on the family because of the separations.

Guilt

Guilt was an overwhelming feeling of majority of the military wives, especially, regarding the impact of deployment on children. They experienced guilt for taking out their anger on the children.

'You are angry for a host of other reasons, but your children bear the brunt of it.'

Military wives experienced emotions of guilt primarily with respect to their care giving role as a parent. Sometimes it was the guilt of *'being too harsh'* with the kids fulfilling the role of disciplinarian. Others expressed guilt at *'not being able to do enough for the kids'*, *'not doing a better job of looking after the kids'*, *'neglecting them'* as they juggled with the immediate and insistent responsibilities. Still others regretted the loss of opportunities for the kids because of husbands' deployment.

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Uncertainty

Feeling of uncertainty often emerged when husbands did not, or, were unable to call home or when wives' were themselves unable to contact their husbands. This feeling was more specifically in women whose husbands were deployed in operational areas

'The most difficult is not knowing how he is, at times.'

Lack of communication led to feelings of uncertainty and some wives reported it as obstacle in making larger life decisions.

'...a lot of things are kept pending.... we keep postponing things.... we will do all that in next posting only'

Loss and Anticipatory Grief

In describing their separation experiences, military wives often referred to their feelings of grief and loss. Women became emotional as they narrated their stories and feelings about life experiences which had touched them so deeply, Anticipating and imagining accidents and death of their husbands during operations and then grieving about it was a very subtle, but a very powerful emotion among military wives. Not all participants discussed about it very openly and who so ever did it, did so in a very circular round about manner.

'Have you ever noticed how they depict faujis in the movies? No matter how much you try the mind starts imagining things and then you get sad... depressed'.

Apart from anticipatory grief, a feeling of loss of family life was a universal assertion by all military wives. Feeling of loss was expressed as families missed out on key events and spending time together

'There is a togetherness which comes from daily sharing of... conversation.... of feelings.... of playing with the kids... all that is missing'.

Tension and Anxiety

Military wives frequently reported that they experienced tension not only regarding their husband's safety '*Mansik tanav to rehta hai akele rehna par*' and security but also because of household hassles' and challenges of single parenting.

'Sometimes I am struggling for breathing space. I am doing one work and keep worrying about the next thing to be done'.

The experience of having husband posted in operational area along with young children and ailing family member was '*a maddening experience*' Said one wife.

Media reports about ongoing operations added to the tension and anxiety of the wives,

Ambivalence

Overall, however, military wives had ambivalent feelings about field postings. Such mixed feelings were expressed in statements like,

'There is nothing so bad. You are alone, yes definitely, but you also learn to find your way'.

'I don't feel anything good about field postings. The only good thing is that there is development of ladies out of compulsion. There is no option'.

Positive Emotions

It is notable that the women also described positive feelings during deployment. Most commonly, these women discussed feeling **proud** of and **loyal** to their husbands and their

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husbands' military missions and duties. Some women were also active in attempting to keep a positive outlook *'You start looking at the brighter side of things. If nothing you learn at least that much'*. One way was to view this as a time *'to focus on oneself and the children.'*

Some women felt enthusiastic about the *'opportunities for growth'* deployment provided, while others were *'only too happy to get away from the demands made by the military during peace postings'*.

Post Deployment

Like the deployment stage, there is a surge of conflicting emotions. While there is **excitement** that the soldier is returning home, *'We feel happy when the field posting ends and he returns safe and sound'* there are some **apprehensions** also. Wives had experienced separations earlier and felt that these were times of conflicting emotions

'Everything is very good initially...we are all happy. But then, expectations are there on both sides. There is a major change again and adjustment is difficult'.

The very changes in roles and routines which are adopted as coping strategies cause much emotional turmoil later. Said one wife,

'I am able to manage everything alone now. But this is what creates problems later'.

Wives mentioned that the *'military family'* which had disappeared, reappears to stake its claim on the military wives in the name of welfare. Military wives reported feeling *'disillusioned'* with the system but *'happy and content to be part of the system again'* while some found it is *'difficult to get back to the military lifestyle'*.

Some wives felt that alternating periods of peace and field postings lead to much relational problems and **disappointment**,

'You wait for him to come home and then you wait for him to come around in the family. By the time we all come in line together again, you are staring at another field posting'

Also pointed out were feelings of **ambiguity** regarding husband's presence in the family after field postings,

'Sometimes, you feel you are walking a thin line.... you feel you were better off alone. My husband is just too much in his combats. He is still in field'.

Making Sense of the Deployment Experience

Some common discursive meaning-making strategies which became apparent as wives discussed their deployment experiences have listed below.

Acceptance

One common strategy employed was accepting that being a part of military wives had to live with the fact that deployment was a part of life. They narrations reflected acceptance regarding the nature of job demands as wives said, *'Actually, we get used to it.'*

Being aware beforehand that a deployment is due also helped in accepting field area postings as a part of the job *'... Chalta hai'*.

Prior experience with spousal deployment also facilitated acceptance as it gave them confidence in their ability to handle it. Wives also accepted that being a part of the military was no easy job and field posting was just one part of it:

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'Fauj hai mauj toh hai nahi (It's the army not a place of enjoyment), so if he has to go, he has to go. Actually, that is his main job as a soldier

Faith in God and Destiny

A few military wives relied on fate / destiny to allay their fears and insecurities

'If something has to happen, it'll happen...it is one's own destiny ...or

'Mishaps can happen even if you are walking on the road'.

Some wives placed their trust in God to alleviate their anxieties,

'Nothing can happen without god's will.

Faith in God and destiny helped in allaying the worries and fears regarding spousal deployment. Belief in some power beyond helped wives in coming to terms with their situations.

Drawing Comparisons

During the interviews all women made comparisons between their own situation and other possible scenarios. Often, when reflecting on their own challenges or negative experiences, women would refer to a worst-case scenario. More specifically, these women compared themselves and their deployment experience to other people, other situations, other job positions and their prior experiences with deployment. There is an underlying sense that women recognize their lives could be worse, depending on these various factors.

'I think we are better placed. We have so many facilities and there is safety here. Our situation is far better than CRPF and BSF families'.

Some wives drew consolation comparing the nature of their spouse's job in the military. Being on 'clerical duty' or a 'doctor' or 'posted at battalion HQ' meant being away from core operational work which is risky and life threatening.

The Unique Identity of Being an Army Wife

Wives also understood that being an army wife meant enduring hardships and that they must be strong enough and live up to that image. The military wife is more tough and resilient than others and they employed this image to go through their deployment experience.

'We are army wives you know. We are very strong. Our circumstances make us as brave as the soldiers on the border'.

'... Par hum fauji hain humein bahut kuchh sehna padta hai'.

Focusing on the Positive Aspects

Yet another meaning making move which became apparent through the interviews was re-appraising events in a positive manner. In narrating their experiences, women not only dwelled upon the negative aspects of deployment, rather they were equally aware of the positive aspects or the benefits of their experience. For instance, while wives maintained that the family was the worst impacted during deployment, they extracted positive ways to look at it by saying that field postings gave them time to focus on their children.

'There are no extra demands I can focus on my children.'

Some other positive gains wives discussed were 'financial gains', becoming 'self-reliant, feeling empowered', about being 'able to spend time with children and focus on their studies', as they also agreed that, 'absence makes the heart grow fonder'.

DISCUSSION

The main objective of this study was to understand the emotional experiences of Indian military wives during prolonged and multiple deployment induced separations and to explore how they made sense of this experience. Results of the interviews show that military wives experience a myriad of emotions during the entire duration of spousal deployment.

During the pre-deployment phase wives' reported feelings of tension, worry, anger and apprehensions of loneliness. They also reported experiencing an emotional distancing as '*we get busy...*' This distancing occurred not only between them as a couple but also within their own selves. This state is akin to an emotional cut off / numbness which one experiences when trying to be strong in the face of some adverse situation. '*Getting things in order ...*' before the departure had an impact on the couple's emotional bonding, thus, adding to the stress of impending separation.

The study also revealed that having gone through deployment separations earlier, wives had a profound understanding and empathy towards their unique situation. They realized that separation was equally difficult for both the partners. However, when couples have to create emotional distance repeatedly and shut down their emotions, it can have long lasting, rather, detrimental impact on the marital relationship. For couples who have been through prior deployments, it may be difficult as they must have started settling down to being together after re-negotiating a shared vision of who they are after the changes from the last deployment. Sadness and anger occur as couples attempt to protect themselves from the hurt of separation which was also expressed by the military wives as they recounted their deployment experience. While the emotional experiences at the pre deployment resonate broadly with the ECOD framework, this study indicates that long term impact of multiple deployments on the marital relationship needs to be investigated further.

The deployment experience of military wives was intense and wrought with complex emotions. Wives expressed going through a myriad of emotions in different contexts during this period of separation. Feelings of loneliness, anger, disappointment, uncertainty, loss, grief, resentment and guilt all were expressed by the wives throughout the interview, all in relation to specific situations but within the broader context of separation.

Loneliness was felt by wives in this study as a general feeling of loneliness emerging from the vacuum created by the deployed partner and also as they went about their daily chores and caregiving responsibilities single-handedly. Situations which they were incapable of handling left the military wives with feelings of helplessness. Another closely related emotion was that of disappointment. Non understanding attitude of the family members like in-laws and parents, indifferent attitude of the civilians and lack of any specific organizational support left the military wives disappointed. Anger and irritation were felt as nothing had prepared them for this kind of married life full of extended separations. Much anger was also directed towards the military organization because it did little to look after them. A feeling of deep anger and bitterness akin to resentment was expressed by wives who had to take on the additional responsibility of looking after a family member, (mostly in-laws) with chronic/ prolonged illness in the husband's absence. The long-term impact on the family as '*the family suffers*' caused unhappiness in the wives as they also felt guilty about treating children harshly, about not being able to do enough for them, for not being able to look after the kids in a better way and about the loss of opportunities for the kids in their father's absence. Uncertainty was felt when wives were unable to contact their husband and

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communicate to them about daily affairs or matters of urgent importance. '*Lots of things are on hold*' and some major decisions could not be made as life moved from one deployment to another. Feelings of loss and anticipatory grief were also present in the narratives of the military wives. Anticipating and imagining accidents and fatalities of their husbands during operations and then grieving about it was a very subtle, but a very powerful emotion among military wives. A rather universal assertion was the feeling of loss of family life. Tension and anxiety about the husbands' wellbeing and a feeling of being overwhelmed with the responsibilities and competing demands that had been thrust on them were also reported. Most of the wives refrained from holding entirely negative feelings about their status as families separated due to deployment. Their situation can be aptly described as that of 'being in dilemma' where they had ambivalent feelings towards field postings.

According to the ECOD Framework the deployment stage when the soldier departs creates a "hole," which can lead to feelings of numbness, sadness, being alone or abandonment (Pincus et al, 2001). The emotions expressed in this study substantiate this stage of the framework. However, the intense negative feelings expressed by the wives suggests a pile up of emotions which may be due to the prolonged and prior experiences with spousal deployment. It is worth mentioning here that the duration of a field posting of an Indian soldier is for a minimum of two years with alternating cycles of peace and field postings and often a soldier may be deployed from one field to another successively as per requirement.

Not only negative but positive emotions of pride and loyalty were also expressed by the military wives. The pile-up of these negative emotions perhaps made it essential for these women to manage their emotions. This management occurred by actively recognizing and concentrating on positive feelings which emerged by thinking about the opportunities for growth and development, about financial gains, about self-reliance, increase in confidence and feelings of empowerment. The ECOD Framework also suggests that as they settle down, most spouses learn that they are able to cope with crises and make important decisions on their own which made them feel more confident and in control.

Many studies done by western military psychologists and researchers describe the emotional processes which families go through during deployment. Some of the negative emotions experienced during the deployment phase of a peacetime deployment are worry, irritability, depression, aimlessness, numbness, sleep disturbance, anger and guilt. In addition to the depressive symptoms experienced during peacetime separations, wartime separations introduce trauma symptoms, such as fears, nightmares, irritability, anger, vigilance, paranoia, etc. (Logan, 1987). Several other studies corroborate the findings of this study. Mansfield et al., (2010) found that army wives with a deployed spouse reported higher rates of depression, anxiety, sleep, and acute stress reaction/adjustment disorders than those without a deployed spouse, with higher rates associated with longer deployments (greater than 11 months).

The post deployment stage was considered yet another difficult phase. There are feelings of joy at the soldier's homecoming, happiness at his safe return and the family becoming a part of the system again. But these are conflicting times also, as there are apprehensions about living together again. Past experiences with deployment had taught the wives that this phase causes much emotional turmoil. The good times last only that long and expectations by both the partners lead to adjustment problems causing disappointment, anger and ambiguity among the military wives. The very changes in roles and routine which were adopted as coping strategies lead to adjustment problems later. There is disappointment and feeling of ambiguity

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as the wife waits for the military spouse to ‘*come around in the family*’ while finding him ‘*still in his combats*’

Deployment brings in separation and along with it, the need for the reorganization of family structure. The impact of deployment on boundaries within the family structure can also be understood in the context of Boss’s ambiguous loss theory. Ambiguous loss is a loss that remains unclear and involves a paradox of both absence and presence of the lost person (Boss, 2006). There may be physical absence with psychological presence or psychological absence with physical presence involved in ambiguous loss. During military deployment, families experience the physical absence of the service member, but a continued psychological presence may exist. Technology assists in keeping service members more psychologically present in their families, which likely aids in the reduction of uncontrollability (Pincus et al., 2001) and uncertainty (Huebner et al., 2007). Upon return, families will experience the physical presence of the service member, but psychological absence may emerge. Therefore, military families may experience both sides of the presence/absence paradox during the trajectory of deployment which is evident from the narratives in this study too. Wives discussed this paradox as they talked about the emotional distancing in the pre deployment stage and later at post deployment stage.

Military families are known to steer through these times of separation successfully and emerge as resilient families. The narratives of the military wives show their flexible approach in interpreting their deployment experience. While discussing at length how difficult deployment was on their family and relationships, they also thought that their relationship will emerge stronger. Similarly, they talked about negative as well as positive emotions. Ability to see both aspects of their situation were helpful for women in dealing with deployment. By appraising events positively, they looked for meaningful interpretations and growth in the face of challenges. Thus, focussing on the positive aspects emerged as a discursive meaning making strategy from the interviews. Often, when reflecting on their own challenges or negative experiences, women would refer to a worst-case scenario. They would compare their own current situation with that of others, their job positions, their living conditions and also their own previous deployment experiences to console themselves and to make sense of their experience.

Wives not only accepted that deployments and field postings were a part of the job, their narrations also asserted that it was the most significant part of their military spouse’s profession. Being aware beforehand that a deployment is due and prior experience with such separations facilitated acceptance. Adopting an external locus of control, helped wives reduce their worries and it also gave them confidence in their ability to handle it because they had done so earlier.

Faith, belief systems and cultural values influence how we make meaning of our life’s experiences. In comprehending others’ distressing experiences and in trying to alleviate their own fears, wives, relied on the notions of destiny and God’s will. The idea that ‘*nothing can happen without God’s will*’ and ‘*Bhagya*’ helped them stay strong and buffer this aspect of spousal deployment. In the Indian worldview, causality extends beyond the natural world and attributing stressful life events to a Higher source helps reduce suffering. Bhagya is roughly translated as ‘destiny’ or fate, against which all human efforts are seen to be of no avail (Rao, 2001). Surrendering to ‘Bhagya’ or destiny which was beyond their control helped wives deal with the anxieties regarding their husband’s safety and make sense of their deployment

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situation which was also beyond their control. Lam and Palsane (1997) also observed that in Indian settings low stress is associated with external control such as God or fate as this reduces the individual sense of personal responsibility.

Military wives also carried the unique identity of being an army wife who was stronger than other wives and could withstand separation hardships. This identity not only gave them strength to live their lives disrupted by deployment but it also instilled in them a sense of pride about their husband's profession and their own contribution towards that and the nation at large. The 'military wife' identity has its roots in the military organizational culture. The military ethos encourages and espouses the image of military wife being strong and resilient, the silent support system who stays behind and holds the fort. Wives identify with the culture of the organization of which they are a part to interpret their experiences.

Wives' efforts towards meaning making were twofold-by making sense of the experience by acceptance, drawing comparisons, spirituality, pride in their identity and by focusing on the positive aspects of deployment. Such digressive meaning making strategies like positive cognitive appraisals, positive emotions, facing reality by acceptance of what is, confidence in their capabilities to face their life's challenges, spirituality and a sense of having a unique identity are some of the meanings making moves that promote resilience. Although studies vary in their claims about how meaning influences resilience, one review concludes that positive reinterpretation and acceptance of events, especially those considered highly traumatic, can lead to reports of growth (Linley & Joseph, 2004).

Implications and Future research

Indian military families have shown great capacity for adaptation and resilience. Despite being critical to its success, military families here have largely remained in the background of public discourse on the military. Although there is a need to better understand the impact of deployment on military families and to provide proper support for them, rigorous research is lacking. It is important to not only understand the practical demands that deployment separation places on the military wife but also the emotional experiences because it has implications for mental health professionals. To provide effective services for military children and families, we need a better understanding of these challenges and strengths framed in terms of Indian culture and functioning of the armed forces during peace and during war. Such researches and their findings will help military psychiatrists/ psychologists and other service providers in offering psychosocial support to families during various stages of deployment.

The well-being of the family preoccupies the mind of an Indian soldier. Studies have shown that positive family functioning boosts a service member's morale, retention, and ability to carry out missions (Shinseki, 2003). Any efforts to build a strong, effective, and sustainable military force must also consider military families, improving the relationships of the soldier with his or her family members and strengthening the family itself (Gottman, Gottman, & Atkins, 2011).

This was an exploratory study and the sample was small hence the findings cannot be generalised. However, it is significant in highlighting the various emotional experiences of Indian military wives impacted by deployments/ field area postings and how they understand it. The findings are very much in congruence with the Emotional Cycle of Deployment Framework which was the foundation of this study. The point of departure in this study was

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that it aimed at exploring the emotions experienced by military wives through prolonged and multiple deployment induced separations. The duration and number of previous deployments perhaps resulted in the intense emotions that emerged from the narrations of the military wives. Further studies can be done on a larger sample for a fuller understanding of the emotions experienced and their impact on mental and physical health of military wives in the long run, and also for generalisability. Long term impact of prolonged and multiple deployments on the marital relationship, parent- child relationship and the entire family functioning can be further studied.

The study also tried to explore the strategies by which wives made sense of their experiences with deployment. The meaning making mechanisms adopted by military wives have implications for stress and coping frameworks and research on resilience promoting meaning making. Further research can be done to understand in depth, the role of positive attitudes, positive reinterpretations and positive emotions in developing resilience as military wives are a perfect example of a resilient population.

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Conflict of Interest

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