# America Abroad:

# Finding Community on an Overseas US Military Base

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## Abstract

In times of conflict and peace, the United States military faces intense scrutiny across a variety of academic disciplines; this includes sociological insights into the dynamics of the "military family" unit. In families with only one spouse serving in the military, the non-military spouse greatly mediates the emotional responses of family members to the unique stressors of the demands of the military lifestyle (Brickell et al., 2020; Jensen et al., 1989; Manguno-Mire et al., 2007; Sherman et al.). Yet the question remains, where do spouses of US service members find a social support network, especially in the most isolating circumstances: living on an overseas military base? Throughout the following text, I utilize the Social Identity Model of Identity Change to analyze the responses of 6 in-depth interviews and 8 supplementary survey responses. Ultimately, I argue that spouses of US service members lose integral parts of their identities in relocating to an international military base; they must then negotiate a space of belonging by fostering new identities, altering existing identities, and/or drawing upon less prominent identities. Understanding the experiences of military spouses living overseas may contribute to the development of new support systems employed by the US Department of Defense and employers with international employees that better meet the needs of families required to relocate abroad; additionally, the findings of this paper expand upon sociological theories of identity formation, loss, and re-establishment in a global context.

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*"I struggled a bit with losing my identity… I think a lot of spouses do,"*

*"One of the hardest parts of marrying military and moving around is finding things for yourself,"*

*"I was very sure of myself… and then there was this changing expectation of what a military spouse is,"*

- From three interviews with the author

## Introduction

Again and again, in interviews with the spouses of US service members, spouses revealed one of the greatest challenges they faced: the feeling of losing who they were. While all military spouses find themselves separated, to some degree, from friends, family, the society they grew up in, their career aspirations, and educational attainment as the result of their spouse's commitment to serving in the US military, nowhere is this more exaggerated than after relocating to an overseas military base.

Since the Second World War, the United States military has been heralded as one of the greatest military powers in the world. With roughly 750 military bases located across 81 countries (Vine, Deppen, & Bolger 2021) and a National Defense budget of nearly 857.9 billion USD for the 2023 fiscal year, the actions of the US military, both domestically and abroad, face close scrutiny (National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2023, 2022). This scrutiny has only been heightened as overseas bases experience frequent protests, some of which gain international news coverage, and the US military's failure to meet recruitment goals for the last decade (Schifrin, 2023). Lacking in these discussions are the voices of those deeply connected to

the military lifestyle without being within the chain of command: the spouses of US service members (hereby referred to as "military spouses").

In joining the US military and/or marrying a service member, individuals agree to the unique way of life that includes frequent relocations both stateside and overseas. All relocations at the behest of the US military require sacrifices of the spouses and children of US service members, especially as it relates to close ties with friends and family (Drummet, Coleman, & Cable, 2003; Jensen et al., 1989; Ruff & Keim, 2014; Russo & Fallon, 2015); however, it appears that the sacrifices and effects of relocating are heightened in the event that a military family receives an accompanied permanent change of station (PCS) to a location outside the continental United States (OCONUS). These accompanied orders signify that immediate family members relocate with the US service member; thus, in keeping the family unit intact, a source of stability remains even as the external environment changes, at times, drastically (Cederbaum et al., 2017; Schreiber 2010). Yet the military spouse must interact with their new environment and seek out a support network to successfully adapt to the demands of the military lifestyle. When families are placed in an unfamiliar country far from friends and family with the knowledge that these moves typically last between one and four years, it raises the question of *how and where military spouses find a sense of community in these global and temporary spaces.*

My research will expand the literature regarding military families and the communities that provide social support for military spouses. The effects of social support are well documented in the literature (Berkman, 1995; Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2009; Ertel, Glymore, & Berkman, 2009; Hughes & Grove, 1981; Kessler, Price & Wortman, 1985); however, they have yet to address those living in temporary, international locations. By examining the experiences of military spouses, I hope to motivate scholars to further analyze the communities of individuals

participating in temporary, international, and professional relocations. Additionally, this study contributes to scholarly literature regarding identity loss, transitions, and re-establishment. The following research presents a new application of the Social Identity Model of Identity Change to individuals participating in transnational relocations. As international relocations increase as a result of globalization, it is important to explore the ways in which individuals remain connected to their previously established sense of self while also adapting to their new environment. Finally, outside of academia, the following research may provide insight into services the US Department of Defense (DoD) could develop to better support the families of US service members stationed overseas. Additional services may lead to increased satisfaction among military families and indirectly aid in recruitment and retention measures.

In this paper, I find that military spouses face a multitude of barriers to community formation off-base due to language barriers, physical separation, and attitudes of the host country. While some may transcend these barriers and overcome their social identity as belonging to a particular nationality, the majority of military spouses describe their strongest sense of community as originating from life on-base. Formal structures provided by the Department of Defense, online groups, and interest-based groups act as a starting point for developing social relationships; the most important sources of community originate from a shared sense of identity. These identities must transcend the act of relocating overseas and provide sites for interpersonal connections.

## Literature Review

### *The Importance and Dynamics of the Military Family Unit*

The military lifestyle can be incredibly challenging, both for those serving and for their families. Due to the stress, dangers, and instability that come with the occupation, developing strong social networks is vital to help lessen the burden. Perhaps the most important of these is the familial unit. Families often represent a keystone of the social support network along with, "but not limited to, friends, romantic partners, pets, community ties, and coworkers" (Li et al., 2021, p. 2) regardless of one's occupation and/or social circumstance (Coventry et al., 2004; Mustanski, Newcomb, & Garofalo, 2011; Wise et al., 2019). However, given the great physical separation between extended family and friends back home, as well as frequent periods of integration into new military communities, the immediate familial unit acts as a constant for US service members. A survey conducted by The Department of the Army Career Engagement Survey (DACES) of 93,794 soldiers in the US Army supports the argument that familial well-being is the greatest concern in choosing to remain in the US Army. Of the top six "extremely important" reasons to leave the Army, five of them related to the familial unit. In fact, the number one reason, cited by 29.2% of respondents, was "Effects of deployments on Family or personal relationships" (Deputy Chief of Staff & People Analytics, 2023, p. 14). It must be noted that while the Army represents the largest branch in the US military, differences in results may occur if all military branches are surveyed.

In acknowledgment of the special importance the immediate family plays in the life of the service member, the United States Department of Defense Office of People Analytics partners with Military OneSource to conduct the biennial Active Duty Spouse Survey for the purpose of gauging the satisfaction of military families with the DoD's services. The latest

survey, conducted between July and November of 2021, covered 8 topics: COVID-19; spouse unemployment and education; financial situation and food security; PCS moves and living arrangements; childcare; deployment; well-being; satisfaction and retention. Perhaps the most glaring statistic in this report regards overall satisfaction with the "military way of life." From 11,764 responses, only 49% of military spouses reported being satisfied with the military way of life (Office of People Analytics, 2023, p. 41). This is a record low since the survey's inception a decade ago in 2012; at the time, it reported a satisfaction rate of 64% (Defense Manpower Data Center, 2014, p.8). It must be noted that the 2021 Survey of Active Duty Spouses addresses the COVID-19 pandemic and a decrease in satisfaction may be accounted for due to periods of isolation; however, the 2021 report acknowledges the downward trend of satisfaction seen in each report since 2012.

Thus established, that the familial unit is present in the considerations of US service members as well as the larger institution of the US military, attention must then be given to the inner dynamics of the military family to understand how the wellbeing of the family is maintained. Research regarding military families frequently falls into two categories: 1) the experiences of service members returning from deployment with PTSD and 2) the effects of deployment and military lifestyle on children. From this research emerges a clear image of the military spouse as moderator.

After returning from deployment, US service members have a higher rate of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder than the national average (Crocq & Crocq, 2000; Wisco et al., 2014). In managing PTSD and other increases in mental illness, such as depression and anxiety (Finnegan & Randles, 2022; Inoue et al., 2023), spouses frequently take on a central care-providing role (Senior, Clarke & Wilson-Menzfeld, 2023). Research suggests that service

members with spouses who take on an active role in treatment, such as attending appointments with medical professionals and encouraging treatment, experience better outcomes (Brickell et al., 2020; Manguno-Mire et al., 2007; Sherman et al., 2008). The military spouse provides support and comfort for the service member, thus moderating the effects of post-deployment mental health.

Children also feel the effects of the military lifestyle; this is heightened during times of deployment in which one parent is gone from the household. Research shows that children may face elevated behavioral and/or mental health issues during these periods (Creech, Hadley, & Borsari, 2014; Cunitz et al., 2019; James & Countryman, 2012; Ruff & Keim, 2014). Other studies indicate that military children grow up to cite an overall positive experience of being raised with a parent in the military despite one parent's absences (Zurlinden et al., 2021). Both situations may be true, especially in the light of the moderator role played by the non-military spouse. Jensen et al. (1989) found that when the remaining spouse, typically a female-identifying mother, keeps a sense of normalcy in the home by altering little about daily functions and avoiding showing great emotional distress, the child(ren) tends to report a sense of sadness at the time of deployment but no long-term negative effects. In this regard, military spouses moderate the emotional impact of deployment on the child(ren) in the household by lessening the emotional distress and disturbances in daily routine. They act as the bridge between the inner dynamics of the family unit and the outside requirements of the US military.

### *Military Community and Integration*

Spouses in military family households have an important role in moderating overall family adaptation to the, at times, tumultuous demands of military life. The act of moderating the

emotions and mental well-being of other family members is emotionally taxing and would require some source of social support outside of the family. Military children can turn to classmates and service members interact closely with other members of their unit daily; all of these individuals understand first-hand the unique difficulties of military life. These social interactions are built into the functioning of a school classroom and the workplace; yet military spouses may not interact in either such spaces. This begs the question of *from whom do spouses receive social support? And how are these connections formed?*

In an attempt to discover barriers to positive health outcomes in the lives of military spouses, Mailey et al. (2018) utilized focus groups to discuss matters such as physical activity, diet, social connection, and stress management. Participants in focus groups stated that they did not develop strong social connections for the following deterrents: 1) it requires too much effort to make plans or develop friendships, 2) spouse groups are cliquey or catty, 3) spouse's rank affects social interactions, 4) there is difficulty in relating to others from different backgrounds, and/or 5) there is difficulty in relating to others with or without kids (Mailey et al., 2018, p. 5). With overseas tour lengths ranging from 12 to 48 months, military spouses must weigh the cost of putting effort into building social connections with the knowledge that they will remain in close contact with these individuals for a relatively short time (United States Department of Defense, 2022). These participants speak specifically to the experiences of building social connections within military society. Defined as all individuals that are directly affected by the hierarchy and institution of the military, thereby including active-duty members, veterans, spouses, and children, military society can present barriers to entrance not seen in non-military societies (Gresle, 2005). The spouses in Mailey et al.'s study touch on these issues by mentioning the pervasiveness of rank and divisions between spouses of officers and enlisted

members. The barriers to social connections within military society suggest that military spouses could be excluded from the potential benefits of stress-buffering.

Cassel (1976) and Cobb (1976) introduced the idea that physical health outcomes could be influenced by the presence of a strong social network. Since then, the theory of stress-buffering, in which social networks reduce the effects of stress on an individual thereby contributing to positive mental and physical health outcomes, has found support across a variety of studies (Berkman, 1995; Cohen & Janicki-Deverts, 2009; Ertel, Glymore, & Berkman, 2009; Hughes & Grove, 1981; Kessler, Price & Wortman, 1985). After reviewing this literature, Thoits (2011) suggested seven potential mechanisms through which social networks may directly affect mental and physical health as well as mechanisms through which the stress-buffering model operates: social influence/social comparison, social control, role-based purpose and meaning (mattering), self-esteem, sense of control or master, belonging and companionship, and perceived support availability (Thoits, 2011, p. 145). Given the frequent and often distant moves required of military families, spouses may acutely feel a lack of a sense of control or master, belonging and companionship, and perceived support availability.

It must be noted that while military spouses may be prohibited from experiencing the full benefits of stress-buffering, that does not necessarily indicate that military spouses suffer from poor levels of mental and physical. Burrell, Durand, and Fortado (2003) found that integration into the military community did not correlate to higher levels of mental and physical health, for 90% of military spouses did not have CES-D scores that suggested depression and 95% had reported average to excellent physical health. This study found that community integration does, however, play a role in the spouse's desire for the service member to remain in the military. As

stated above, spousal approval of the military lifestyle greatly influences the actions of the service member and is therefore of great interest to the US DoD.

Finally, Bowen et al. (2003) utilized a community practice model to explore the mechanisms through which Air Force families adapted to their new surroundings. They found that informal community support combined with formal military unit support led to a sense of community. This sense of community, in addition to the presence of children and additional informal community support, promotes family adaptation (Bowen et al., 2003, p.40). Bowen et al. highlight that services made to help families adapt must take a multidimensional approach that integrates a variety of types of support. By implementing services that match these models, the DoD could increase satisfaction among military families through their integration into military society.

Thus far, research regarding military families showcases that while military spouses display relatively high levels of physical and mental health, they face a multitude of barriers to the formation of social connections within military society. Building a social network is correlated to greater satisfaction with the military lifestyle and a greater willingness to remain in the military- a marker that has been on a continual decrease over the last decade and is of serious concern to the DoD. The existing literature has a large gap in that it does not explore the experiences of military spouses who are successful in finding communities and the mechanisms that bring military spouses together.

### *Sources of Community for Expatriates*

Since the research regarding military families does not yet explore the specific sources of community that are available and prove to be successful, I turn to the literature regarding a

similar population: expatriates. Officially defined by Oxford Reference as "a person settled outside their country of origin," the term has come to take on a narrower meaning in the professional world (Rogers, Castree & Kitchin, 2013), to represent skilled individuals who move to another country, typically at the request of an employer or to seek advancements in their career, while maintaining the intention of returning to their native country (Cranston, 2017). By these definitions, US service members and their families can be classified as a type of expatriate.

Expatriates and their families face many of the same challenges as seen in the experiences of military families living overseas including the loss of employment status, weakened connections to friends and family, an inability to speak the local language, feelings of a lack of self-efficacy, and importance placed on family well-being in considering to remain overseas (Andreason, 2008; Black & Stephens, 1989; Cole & Nesbeth, 2014; Fukuda & Chu, 1994). Due to these similarities among expatriates and military families, a study into community formation among expatriates may prove beneficial. Bayraktar (2019) asked 42 expatriates across 21 countries to journal their experiences adjusting and integrating into their new environment. She found that by drawing on different aspects of one's identity, the expatriates could connect with other individuals for specific purposes. She identified the identity categories to be "home country nationals" or individuals with the same nationality but still living in the home country, typically friends and family; "host country nationals" or individuals of the nationality of the host country; "compatriots" or individuals of the same nationality to the expatriate and also living in the same host country; and "foreign expats" or individuals of a different nationality from the expatriate and living in the same host country (54-59). Of these 4 groups, the compatriots provided the greatest sense of social support while also aiding in integration into the host country. Compatriots acted as a "bridge" while also providing a "sense of belonging" and

"emotional support." This is not to say that the other identity groups are unimportant. In fact, each group provides essential support for the expatriates. Individuals call upon friends and family at home when they require an "anchor point," they turn to host country nationals to learn how to "fit in," and other foreign expats showcase how the individual is "comparable to others" in the same scenario (55). The most important aspect of Bayraktar's text is her observations regarding the importance and utilization of identity among expatriates to fulfill their needs. From this study, it may be concluded that individuals living overseas draw upon different, and sometimes isolated, identities in order to form social connections with a variety of individuals. Furthermore, by moving overseas, expatriate individuals develop new identities, such as "foreign expats," that they must then negotiate. While Bayraktar's study looks only at single expatriates, and not those with families, she showcases that for any study regarding community formation in a cross-cultural setting, observations regarding identity loss, formation, and utilization must be central.

## Theoretical Framework

### *Social Identity Theory*

Social Identity theory first entered scholastic literature with Tajfel and Turner's (1979) paper "An Integrative Theory of Intergroup Conflict." They explain that individuals self-categorize into distinct social groups, and their membership in these groups shapes their identity, their actions and beliefs, and their interactions with members of other groups. Tajfel and Turner aimed to explain "in-group" and "out-group" dynamics and the individual's position within a wider social sphere. In alignment with Social Identity Theory, military families living overseas

easily sort themselves into one of two groups: members of the host country or military-affiliated Americans. In this instance, social groups form on the basis of national identity. Social Identity Theory could explain the lack of social interactions, on a large scale, between American military spouses and members of the host country. Since the expansion of the US's network of overseas military bases after the Second World War, protests and tensions between host country nationals and those affiliated with the US military have persisted (Vine, 2018). Tajfel and Turner largely observe groups in conflict with each other; however, they explain that groups with minimal conflict only experience "favoritism and discrimination" as opposed to outright hostility (39). The occasional protest near military bases by members of the host country showcases some level of intergroup conflict that rarely involves outright violence but may lead to favoritism and discrimination in individual interactions.

Tajfel and Turner assert that "when social identity is unsatisfactory" individuals will attempt one of two things: 1. "To leave their existing group and join some more positively distinct group" or 2) "make their existing group more positively distinct" (40). With groups originating in national identity, unsatisfied individuals must take the latter approach. Language barriers, cultural differences, and the inability to adjust to one's country of origin hinder members from moving between groups. This does not mean, however, that the individuals cannot develop formal or informal relationships with members of the other groups. Social Identity Theory looks at interactions between groups on a large scale and how membership may affect the actions and attitudes of the individual. For those that build intergroup relationships, these form *despite* belonging to different groups and more than likely never fully disregard the distinction.

### *Social Identity Model of Identity Change*

While Social Identity Theory includes mechanisms that align with the larger groups of military-affiliated Americans and members of the host country, the Social Identity Model of Identity Change (SIMIC) will be utilized in analyzing the processes of community formation on military bases. SIMIC attempts to explain the effects of life-changing transitions, such as illness, moves, or retirement, on one's sense of identity (Haslam et al., 2019; Haslam et al., 2021; Jetten et al., 2018). SIMIC states that individuals have multiple identities as a result of their membership in multiple social groups. Individuals who can maintain group identity before and after a life-changing transition better adapt to their new position or environment (e.g. Craig et al., 2022; Iyer et al., 2009; Jetten et al. 2015). In the context of military spouses, any relocation may be seen as a life-changing transition; however, a move overseas exaggerates the effects of a life-changing transition. Overseas, spouses are further from family and friends than when stationed in the US, many pause their careers due to complications with visas and language barriers, and one may feel disconnected from host country nationals as explored above. By drawing on identities that endure the relocation or by discovering new sources of identity, spouses can discover a sense of community and adapt to their new environment.

## Methods

Due to a lack of funds, time, and clearance to enter bases, I opted to conduct interviews and gather survey responses as an attainable means to understand spouses' experiences living overseas. Specifically, the following questions guided the development of the research methods:

1. Where/ with whom do military spouses find the greatest sense of belonging?

2. Do military spouses intentionally seek out community/ a support network or does this occur spontaneously?
3. What opportunities are available to military spouses to interact with members of the host country? Is it possible to find a sense of belonging among members of the host country?
4. Do military spouses experience a sense of identity loss? Which identities are lost, and which remain?

From my own position adjacent to the military family community, I have access to some of the most frequently utilized online spaces for military spouses: private Facebook groups. These groups, designed and moderated by military spouses, provide a space for individuals to obtain information, share advice, and find community from other spouses in similar situations. The participants and subjects of these Facebook groups are quite extensive. Nearly every base has at least one base-specific Facebook group; in addition, there are groups dedicated to moving overseas, groups for spouses looking to work remotely, groups making fun of the military lifestyle, general groups for all military significant others, and countless others. I gained access to these groups to learn the language and culture of the military society in preparation for interviewing participants. A trend emerged across the variety of private groups I investigated: they are intended to be a safe space in which spouses can discuss personal matters, thus strict policies restrict the posting of surveys or using existing posts for research purposes. As a result, I messaged individuals directly via Facebook Messenger to evaluate their willingness to participate. Specifically, I messaged individuals who posted on the USMA West Point Girlfriends Support Group page and MILITARY WIVES & GIRLFRIENDS page. The population of these Facebook groups tends to be younger, female, and with fewer years of

military experience. Military spouses active on Facebook, both in private and public groups, represent a significant portion of the recruited participants at roughly two-thirds. To combat a population bias, I reached out to personal contacts that I knew had more experience with military life and had lived overseas. For these individuals and those recruited via Facebook, I used email, text messaging, and direct messaging on Facebook to send a survey and arrange interviews. I recruited individuals if they had met the following requirements:

1. Currently married to a US service member
2. Accompanied their spouse on an overseas PCS and resided on/near an overseas US military base
3. Never been an active-duty service member themselves
4. Spoke English as their primary language
5. Spouse has been active-duty in the last 10 years

Furthermore, I excluded dual-military households for multiple reasons: 1) dual-military families do not represent the majority of military families and 2) active-duty members have orders, obligations, and a designated place within the institution of the US military that may result in different community membership. Next, bases located in Alaska and Hawaii fall under the same OCONUS designation as all other overseas bases. For this research, I excluded individuals whose only OCONUS base was in either of these states. I acknowledge the unique challenges presented by bases in these locations such as distance from the US, a cultural background distinct from the continental US, and a unique way of living; however, I did not feel that these locations required the same adaptations to local society as bases in sovereign nations other than the US. Finally, I limited participants to those who speak English as their primary language to ensure that

all participants could fully consent to the research as well as understand the questions being asked. These restrictions held true for both survey and interview participants.

The survey presented to participants asked short-answer questions regarding their interactions off-base, their interactions on-base, their living arrangements, services offered by the DoD for transitioning to a new base, and a variety of multiple-choice socio-demographic questions. I received 33 responses to the survey with 12 individuals fully answering all short-answer questions. 4 of the survey respondents also participated in an interview; in these cases, survey responses were paired with the corresponding interview transcripts. In the end, 8 individuals completed only the survey, 2 individuals participated only in an interview, and 4 individuals completed both the survey and the interview for a total of 14 unique experiences. In the survey, all questions were optional so that participants could determine which questions best matched their experience living overseas as well as providing the option to leave questions blank if participants did not feel comfortable disclosing certain information. At the end of the survey, I asked anyone willing to participate in an interview to leave their email address.

This led to 6 interviews lasting between 20 - 80 minutes depending on the participant's time availability and the willingness to discuss at length. Throughout these interviews, I asked questions regarding their interactions with members of the host country and the various mechanisms of community building on- and off-base. All participants self-identify as female and have husbands in either the Army, Navy, or Air Force. Participants' affiliation with the military ranged from 7 months to a full 22-year career, with one participant having lived on 3 overseas military bases for a total of 7.5 years and another arriving overseas 1.5 months before participating in the interview. In recruiting potential participants, I did not strictly specify the length of time in which participants needed to be affiliated with the military; military spouses

could be married to service members classified as active-duty, reserve, or veteran so long as they were active-duty in the last 10 years. I make this distinction largely due to the changing attitudes surrounding the military lifestyle and services offered to military spouses and their families. In recent years, greater attention has been given to the use of gender-inclusive language as more male-identifying individuals marry US service members. Furthermore, in observing the Facebook groups' "about" sections, I noticed most of the groups were created between 2010 and 2020. In order to survey respondents on the topic of Facebook groups, I wanted to ensure that they at least had access to such groups regardless of their decision to participate in them. All data collected from interviews and surveys has been stored on a UChicago Box file to ensure maximum protection of participant's personal information.

In analyzing the data from the interviews, I use a method of qualitative thematic coding to develop themes and categories within them. Themes that emerged from the data include barriers to cross-cultural community formation off-base, bridging gaps between on- and off-base life, on-base community formation via formal and broad structures, and groups of shared identity as a source of community on-base. For each theme, I chose exemplary examples; all participants are anonymized and given a pseudonym that reflects their gender identity.

## Findings and Analysis

### *Barriers to Cross-Cultural Community Formation Off-Base*

In any event of living overseas, even for those simply vacationing in a foreign country, one must exchange currencies, navigate a language barrier, learn cultural differences, and generally adapt to the new environment. For military spouses, living overseas for years, often

with little to no prior experience within a specific country, can provoke feelings of isolation and uncertainty. The most salient of the barriers separating American military spouses from the members of the host country, as cited by the participants, is the language barrier. There appears to be a general agreement among military spouses that understanding the local language largely correlates to the overall experience one has while living overseas. For Alice, who obtained a master's degree in linguistics and lived on overseas bases in Belgium, Iceland, and Japan, she saw her time overseas as an opportunity to practice her language skills and develop social connections with members of the host country. However, even Alice admits that it is "unusual" for military spouses to move overseas with prior knowledge of the local language. She contributes a large portion of her enjoyment of living overseas to her skills in studying and teaching languages.

A more typical recount of addressing the local language barrier came from Caroline. Caroline lived at Camp Humphreys in South Korea for two years. She detailed her experience in navigating the language barrier in South Korea and exemplifies the range of emotions felt and adaptations acquired by military spouses:

"[It's] definitely really intimidating at first because the language barrier was so large. It was something that we said, '*Oh we'll study and learn Korean*,' and then, after two weeks I thought '*there's no way.*' If I lived here for 2 years and took classes, I might be able to have a [basic] conversation. I would say Koreans do typically know a little bit of English; I think they learn it in school. We would have to go to a local grocery store to get our trash bags, and I could say '*hello*' or something in Korean like '*trash bags*,' and they'd [say] '*Yes what size*' [in English]. I always felt that they were very nice to us. We could point to things. Or there was a time we went to a mall, and I was asking where a kid's store was. We pulled up our translator app, and we just talked through it. She [a Korean national] would read what I said through the translator app, she would talk back, and then I would read it. We always had a really good experience. It was just intimidating at first because we had never done that before, so I was a little nervous. I didn't want to offend anybody."

Caroline displays two intentions: 1) to learn the local language and 2) to avoid offending members of the host country. In each of the 6 interviews conducted, the same intention to learn the local language and the concession that a stay of less than 4 years was simply not enough to become fluent arose. Each military spouse stated that they learned some set of basic phrases: greetings, road signs, and anything necessary for daily functioning.

While military spouses may move overseas intending to learn the language, the physical separation between military-affiliated Americans and members of the host country makes learning the local language more difficult as well as unnecessary. Obtaining one's housing assignments, especially on overseas bases, is a complicated and varied process. Service members and their families may live on-base or off-base; however, they are not always given a choice. A variety of factors affect the choices offered to service members and their families including the availability of on-/off-base housing, the rank of the service member, the number of dependents in the household, and the presence of pets, among others. In a significant number of cases, military families do not receive a choice; they are either simply informed of their living assignment or given a negligible choice such as two homes on-base. Eloise, the spouse of an Army officer living in Germany, explains that living in off-base housing is not always the immersive experience the name suggests:

"I lived off-base. But the way that the military had set it up was that our entire neighborhood was rented out by the housing office. So, everybody in our neighborhood was also a military family stationed there. All of our neighbors were also Americans, and they were also military-affiliated. Then you went one street over and they were German."

Some of these off-base living arrangements, such as the one Caroline and her family lived in while they were in South Korea, had nicknames, such as "US Village," that signify their

connection to the military base; the origin of these nicknames remain unclear, but the pervasiveness is well-established. This is not, however, always the case with off-base housing. Occasionally, service members and their families will be given the option to live in a nearby city and be truly immersed in the local society. In the end, housing arrangements can be, as described by one spouse, "the luck of the draw."

Furthermore, the US military base recreates closed borders overseas. In order to enter a US military base, one must be given clearance; there are multiple ways to attain this including being an active-duty service member or their dependents (spouses and children are considered dependent), working on-base, and/or being sponsored by a service member. Being a military installation, national security takes precedence in determining who may gain access. Essentially, overseas military bases act as a piece of the United States on foreign soil; this is best illustrated by the application of US laws on-base. Furthermore, the borders of bases are closed except to military-affiliated US citizens and those given special clearance; thus, US borders are recreated internationally.

The physical borders of overseas military bases not only recreate national US borders overseas, but they also recreate US culture overseas. Caroline describes the experience of crossing this border to experience both the legal and cultural differences:

"I always said it was like leaving Korea and entering America when you came on base. It was two totally different worlds. Even the traffic and road rules changed. Yes, there were Korean workers at the businesses, but they all spoke perfect English. Off-base was completely different. Many spoke English but maybe not fluently and all signs and rules were in Korean. The culture, food, and environment were completely different. But both parties were friendly. We were reminded that we were guests of Korea, and we should be respectful and be courteous to those from the host country."

Eloise stated that life on-base was a "zip-locked version of transplanted America." Most military bases, especially the larger bases, act as their own cities; they can have populations in the tens of thousands. Depending on the specific base, spouses have access to almost everything they could need: the Commissary, the on-base grocery store, sells American products; all bases have post offices and some of the larger ones have hospitals; spouses have access to social groups and houses of worship. Nearly all needs are met on-base making it so that spouses do not have to leave if they do not wish to. Through living on 3 different overseas bases, Alice could see both the benefits and detriments of what she calls "Little America:"

"Some people are looking for *Little America;* some people want *Little America.* I don't begrudge that, but that was never my specific interest. I was happy to move overseas, whereas I met plenty of people who went begrudgingly. [They] felt like they were being dragged overseas. For them, having this *Little America* feeling was comforting. Being able to go shop in the Commissary and get food that was familiar to them and having a bowling alley- those kinds of things were really familiar, and I think helpful to them. I think the danger can be that you become very comfortable in that safe, familiar environment."

Alice acknowledges that during times of hardship, such as when service members must leave for months at a time for training or during the initial months of living overseas, the comforts of home may ease the stress; however, never leaving base can be "dangerous." As mentioned above regarding language, spouses tend to have a better experience when they are open to and make an effort to learn the local language. That appears to be true here as well. Those who refuse to leave the base and explore the country they find themselves residing in, limit themselves to the space within the base's borders. In order to avoid falling into the comforts of life on-base completely and enjoy one's stationing overseas, the spouse must, to some extent, find it within themselves to branch out and explore local life. Harper, a 22-year-old woman who moved to Yokota Air Base in Japan only a month and a half before agreeing to interview with

me, explained that her train rides between Yokota Air Base and Tokyo fulfilled a desire to explore, developed a sense of confidence, and taught her a few unspoken rules about cultural norms:

"We're like a mile away from Tachikawa train station so it's really easy to go. I'll park on that side of base, I'll walk a mile to the train station, then I'll buy my tickets, and I'll go around and see things. I've been to Tokyo twice. I've been everywhere in between [Tokyo and Yokota Air Base]. It's a lot of fun and it's hard in the sense of figuring out what's socially acceptable. I've gotten so many dirty looks on the train for just whispering to the person I'm with. You're supposed to be super quiet on trains, which I learned very quickly. We really just don't want to be rude. Driving on the left side of the road is definitely scary, so I don't go anywhere more than 5 miles away from base because I've only been driving for a month. There's just a lot to see."

While military spouses most frequently cite language barriers as one of the greatest barriers to interacting with members of the host country, perhaps an underlying inhibitor of finding a sense of belonging in the local society results from the political attitudes of members of the host country as well as negative views of Americans. Most spouses report overall positive and/or neutral attitudes regarding their interactions with members of the host country. There does appear to be some difference based on geographical location. Overall, spouses who lived in Europe cited members of the host country to be relatively kind if not a bit stoic. When spouses made an effort to learn the local language, experiences appeared to improve. The most negative experiences came from those who lived overseas in Japan. It must be acknowledged that Japan has a unique history with the US military and overseas bases. Specifically, the bases located on the island of Okinawa are frequently protested and unwanted by locals. It seems that single, personal interactions in addition to organized protests tend to discourage military spouses from pursuing integrating into the host country's society. The following two experiences highlight the types of interactions that military spouses found to be unwelcoming. The first comes from

Danielle who lived in Japan for two years before moving back to the US to give birth to her son.

The second excerpt comes from an anonymous survey respondent:

"Oh yeah, every Tuesday, I believe, of the first month [at Yokosuka Naval Base in Japan] there were protesters outside the base with signs [saying], '*we don't need this military base here,' 'go back to your own country,' 'go away,' 'we don't want you here.*' So there definitely are people out there that are not fans of military personnel at all. You just gotta watch out. I always say if you're gonna go out, you should go out with a buddy. That way if anything happens, you're with somebody. It can be scary… in Japan, I'm covered in tattoos, they'll [Japanese nationals] look at me and they'll scoot away from me… Old people called me 'trash.'"

"Overall, the host country is friendly. There is some discrimination for being Americans. Our child is often bullied on playgrounds for not being Japanese."

Overall, the feelings of the host country varied tremendously both between bases and between individuals who lived on the same base. Some clear trends emerged such as spouses acknowledging that they did not experience any hostility towards them as an individual, but the presence of the military base was unwanted. Others cited feeling welcomed or tolerated so long as they were cautious of their actions. Finally, 2 spouses felt that older generations tended to have stronger anti-military and/or anti-American sentiment whereas younger generations tended to be curious about American culture.

Given the barriers to communication, differences in culture, the physical separation between military-affiliated Americans and members of the host country, the recreation of American culture and comforts abroad, and varying political and social attitudes of members of the host country, few military spouses cited finding a sense of community within the host country society. In off-base interactions, their identification with the US military often separated them into a distinct group from members of the host country. This distinction in combination with the various barriers discussed above, pushed military spouses to find community on-base or with other military-affiliated Americans.

*Bridging Gaps Between On- and Off-Base Life*

While 75% of the military spouses that partook in this research followed the trend of finding community on-base and/or with military-affiliated Americans, two participants in particular, were able to transcend the barriers separating life on- and off-base and ultimately found a sense of community with members of the host country. Importantly, both spouses found these spaces as a result of their membership in military-affiliated social groups. Alice, the linguist, had the unique opportunity to teach English to students at the National Defense Academy of Japan. Most spouses that work overseas, take up on-base positions or work remotely for US companies due to their inability to obtain work visas. Alice was able to take this teaching position because the National Defense Academy had an agreement with the Yokosuka US Naval base where Alice was stationed. When asked which communities most contributed to her positive experience, Alice cited the teachers and students she worked with:

"For me, [the greatest sense of community] was the teaching community that I had when I was in Japan. I struggled a bit with losing my identity…I think a lot of spouses do... So, the teaching for me was something where I was 'me' first and I happen to be married to this person. My relationship with the people I taught with and with my students was really just with 'me' first. That was the most fulfilling part. At the end of that ten-week program, there were about 15 students in each cohort, we would invite them to our house, and we would make Mexican food and margaritas. It really was this amazing opportunity for them to spend time with us and for us to spend time with them. They would play video games with my kids. Over our 2 1/2 years there, I probably had 300 students, and they had all different ideas and were very curious. I would say try to find something that's 'yours,' and that is not specifically related to you being a spouse- it could be a job, it could be a volunteer position, it could be whatever."

Alice talks specifically about losing her self-identity and feeling as if she did not have an identity separate from her husband. As a result, she sought out a space that would reconnect her with one of her identities, her identity as a linguist and a teacher, as well as somewhere her husband's role in the Navy was not assumed to be a personal identity. As mentioned above, most

spouses living overseas experience severe limitations in advancing their careers. Spouses with higher degrees or advanced training often feel that they have lost a part of their identity because they cannot work in their field overseas. Those who find work opportunities that align with their career can draw upon their career- or education-based identities and find a source of fulfillment and community. Thus, the experience of Alice is uncommon.

Eloise, however, found a volunteer position that functioned similarly to Alice's work experience; through her volunteer position, Eloise was granted group membership and a new identity that then connected her with a community in the host country. Eloise has her master's degree in social work and was quite confident in what her experience would be once her family moved to Germany. The reality of living overseas, however, prevented Eloise from working. Instead, she found a community with German hunters. The US military offers Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) programs which include children's sports teams, travel opportunities, camping, local entertainment, and more. In Germany, Eloise's husband encouraged her to take part in an abbreviated 16-week German hunting education class. It was through these classes and subsequent hunting culture that Eloise gained a better understanding of German culture as a whole and expanded her social network to include German nationals:

"The reason I got into hunting was because it was German, and because it was the way the Germans do it. They do group hunts where most of the time you go out with other people, and everybody is assigned to a certain spot in the woods. At the end of the night, you all come in and get together to have dinner before or after. There are funerals for the animals. There are songs played that date back to when they could first form a horn out of brass. There are different traditions that [the German hunters] still have. If you're hunting alone in the woods, you're taught the rites to say over the animals. That was part of what was imparted onto us, even in the abbreviated hunting classes. [The German hunters] still very much wanted us to have the culture, so that we wouldn't stick out like a sore thumb. I thought it was still cool and I really appreciated it. In the end, even though it was this kind of backward way of getting into it, I was pulled into the German culture. I was pulled into the German society through this random class that MWR offered."

Beyond being personally invited to group hunts, Eloise also became well-acquainted with the local butcher who would prepare the meat from the animals hunted. Hunting as dictated by German law requires there to be a community of individuals working together, with shared meanings, and interacting regularly. Eloise shared that she never hunted in the United States and that being a hunter had never before been a part of her identity. This example showcases that when identities are lost in the move, such as Eloise's identity associated with her career, new identities must be found, or old ones reconnected with to find a community within which one belongs. For Alice and Eloise, these communities were found with members of the host country through opportunities offered by their affiliated military base.

The Department of Defense has a variety of resources that intend to connect military families with the host country. The MWR is one of the largest mediators in connecting military families with the host country, especially through their travel opportunities:

"[the MWR] did a whole bunch of different stuff in Germany to, kind of, bring the Americans out into Europe. It was well set up, it was well-supported, it was all researched. A lot of the people who were staffing the MWR in Europe were somehow affiliated, or they had been affiliated, with the military at some point. They had become civilians working for the military while they were in Germany; so, they knew what was helpful, they knew what was not, and they tried to bridge that cultural gap. [They encouraged Americans] to go out and explore, but also try and order [food] in German and not assume people speak English."

In addition to the MWR services provided, overseas bases also require all service members and their families to attend a training meeting shortly after the relocation. During these cultural briefings, service members and their families are informed about the culture, laws, areas that are unadvised to visit, and "things you can do to become a better representative of people in the United States." These briefings, while undoubtedly helpful, do not provide a sense of community, but instead, give the tools necessary for spouses to approach life off-base in an informed manner.

*On-Base Community Formation Via Formal and Broad Structures*

As acknowledged above, it is relatively rare for military spouses to find their main source of community off-base, even more so if the services or connections of the military base are not present. The question then remains, *where do spouses find a sense of community on-base?* The Department of Defense provides multiple formal structures that ensure military families are connected to the greater military society on-base. Across all branches of the military, there are multiple structures under different names that fulfill the roles of providing information, mentorship, and social groups. Throughout the interviews, I heard spouses talk about Soldier and Family Readiness Groups (SFRGs), the Sponsor Program, Key Spouse assignments, and Command Groups. For many, these groups are incredibly helpful in answering the questions that arise from moving overseas. The process is lengthy, complicated, and stressful. Even simple comforts, such as the furniture in one's home, may take upwards of two months to arrive. These support groups, whether composed of all the spouses of a specific chain of command or a single individual assigned to a particular family, can provide the necessary guidance for the unique needs of a given family.

These formal support groups disseminate vital information, but they can also provide the first sense of belonging. Eloise discussed the importance of the SFRG she was assigned to in creating a sense of a wider, family-like social network:

"The reason that the SFRG- that specific line of command- became more of a social circle was because my husband's Colonel, who was in charge of that chain of command, *his wife* was very open, very active, and very social. She was welcoming to anybody that wanted to come in. She was amazing. We ended up actually preferring a move later on, and choosing to go somewhere because we knew that this particular family would be at our next duty station. The group of spouses that ended up showing up at those events over and over again tended to be outgoing and very forgiving. Everyone was treated with openness and family support. Everybody in that chain

of command had a similar schedule. So, if the unit was going to go do something over the weekend, everybody in that chain of command and all the families would be affected equally. I actually led the Family Care Team which supports families in case of emergencies. I ran the team that, if, for example, while you're stationed in Germany and you're pregnant, and something awful happens during labor, we would be the team that steps in until your family arrives to help."

In Eloise's case, the SFRG assumed the role of family and friends and provided the support military families needed. Each spouse that I interviewed mentioned the difficulties of living far from family and friends. In fact, Harper had stated that she "ha[s]n't run into one person here that hasn't expressed how much they miss their family." In moving overseas, the distance appears to stretch feelings of connection and identity with one's friends and family back home. As a result, many search for a community on-base that can fill those roles. Eloise explains that for her, it was the SFRG; in Caroline's observations, it could be neighbors or other friends made overseas. Eloise further integrated herself into this community by leading the Family Care Team of her SFRG. For her, this responsibility became a part of her identity and provided her with a purpose. This is not to say that all in an SFRG, or a similar command-related group, will have the same feelings of community; as Eloise points out, the Colonel's wife who led the SFRG was incredibly welcoming and set the tone for the whole group.

In the event that these assigned groups do not provide a sense of community, all spouses have access to the Spouses' Club. The Spouses' Club is available at all bases, but as Jane explains, it appears to become more prominent overseas:

"I wouldn't say I'm actively avoiding it [the Spouses' Club], but it's definitely never been something I did at other posts. They [other spouses at military bases in the US] said 'Spouses' Club' and I was like 'What is that?' I had never heard of it before. But a lot of things are different over here than at other posts. I think this is because you're so removed from family and friends. The only communities are the ones you build on-post and are actually part of the military community."

The Spouses' Club is a non-profit charity organization first and foremost. Caroline explained that the Spouses' Club raises funds to be gifted to any service member or their family; additionally, the Spouses' Club provides a source of a wide variety of social groups:

"I've had good and bad experiences with [the Spouses' Club], but mostly good. They always advertise themselves as an organization that raises money for grants and scholarships. They do that through their events. They usually have one big fundraiser throughout the year that raises that money. Almost anyone can apply [to be granted the funds]. It can be spouses; it can be your children just as long as they are affiliated with the military in some way. [The Spouses' Club] usually has something monthly- sometimes they're luncheons. The one in Korea had a newcomers' club where somebody was in charge of teaching you how to take the train to Seoul. They would have crafting clubs or running clubs or book clubs that were all organized under the umbrella of the Spouses' Club. It was just a way to socialize and meet people. It was a good group for that. They definitely did a lot of fundraising and helped out a lot of people. They did community grants for organizations on-post or off-post that might need something. I would say that's [how the Spouses' Club] advertises, but I wouldn't say that's how it always is."

When asked about the Spouses' Club, there would often be a slight hesitation on how spouses wanted to approach the topic. The two spouses that had spent the longest time affiliated with the military conceded that they had equal parts great and terrible experiences with the Spouses' Club. In these social groups that attempted to cater to all the spouses on a military base, the social scene represented a mix of attitudes regarding the military. Alice explained that some spouses would assume the rank of their service member partner and expect others to treat them as if they earned the rank themselves. At the same time, there would be down-to-earth military spouses who would become long-term acquaintances. Regardless, none of the spouses cited the Spouses' Club as a central site for community building. I argue that the breadth of the Spouses' Club's activities does not connect spouses with similar identities. Instead of connecting individuals based on the identities they hold the closest, the Spouses' Club becomes a site of clashing attitudes where tensions can run high. As a result, spouses do not feel as if they are a member of a specific community.

Finally, private Facebook groups represent another site for social interaction across the entirety of all military spouses stationed at a given base. These Facebook groups exist for nearly all US military bases regardless of their location stateside or OCONUS; however, from the experiences of the interviewed military spouses, the Facebook groups of overseas bases have more traction. Caroline explains the dual purpose of the Facebook groups to both provide information and connect individuals:

"There was one [Facebook group] in particular that anybody could join. It was an excellent resource; you could just search that page for "hair salon" or "doctors" and they would have [a recommendation]. But then you would also have girls [post about looking for friends], and nine times out of ten, somebody would say 'I'll meet you at this coffee shop.' There would be a lot of the young wives because they're new to the army, new to Korea, new to all of it, and just needed a place to go, to find somebody. It definitely is a resource I usually don't use, but it definitely works for a lot of people."

Danielle was one such spouse who utilized Facebook groups to find initial connections:

"I went on the Facebook page for our base, and I was like 'Hey I'm new here, this is my age, this is who I am, I have no friends, let's be friends.' I got a few people who were like 'Hey girl let's hang out whatever' and I would hang out with a few people until I found [my best friend]. She's the best person on earth. I thought 'OK this is my person, and I don't need to look for friends anymore. I have her.'"

While Danielle had success in finding social connections, one that she confidently feels will be a life-long friend, she does not necessarily enjoy the interactions that take place in these groups. When asked what interactions take place in these groups, she said:

"Drama. Drama is what happens on those Facebook groups. A lot of women just start drama for no apparent reason. Their posts are not necessary, just petty little things."

She was not the only one to hold this opinion either. Facebook groups were described as "echo chambers" where complaints of living overseas grew. In the end, the informal status of the

Facebook groups and their attempts to appeal to all spouses may result in the space becoming overrun with complaints and negativity. Still, however, spouses, especially those who are young and newly arrived overseas, do have success in finding social connections.

Overall, the effectiveness of the broad formal structures provided by the Department of Defense to create social networks among military spouses varies. SFRGs, Sponsor assignments, and Key Spouse assignments provide useful connections, and, in some cases, provide the basis of an on-base social network. The Spouses' Club and Facebook groups, on the other hand, attempt to accommodate all spouses of different backgrounds in a manner that has the potential to be successful but also to foster hostile social environments.

### *Groups of Shared Identity as a Source of Community On-Base*

While offered entrance into social groups by the Department of Defense, many spouses look for community in groups that maintain a sense of a shared identity. When asked where spouses find community each spouse answered with some group in which they share an identity. As explored above, Alice found community off-base with her fellow instructors as they bonded over their shared career choice; furthermore, her interactions with the students made her feel a part of a larger community in which she was authentically herself and someone separate from her husband. Similarly, Eloise found a sense of belonging in the German hunting community. She would join in on group hunts and practice the culture. In addition, Eloise made a broader social network through the hunting group by connecting with the local butchers and informing other military spouses about hunting laws. For the remainder of the spouses I interviewed, community was largely found through one's identity as a parent.

By far the most discussed source of community, as well as exclusion, came from parental identity. Caroline cited her children and their choice of activities as her number one source of community on any military base:

"I would say a lot of my community, and it's not just for overseas bases, but in general, comes from my children. With activities that they're involved in, other parents are there, and we find common ground because our kids are doing the same thing or are the same ages. Number one [source of community] was probably just meeting women at the [school] bus stop or going to baseball…I think that the main source of community would be kids- and spouse-related groups."

Spouses did not need to have school-age children to gain access to social groups intended for spouses with children. Jane, a mother to a one-year-old daughter, joined a fitness group called "Sweat Like a Mother." This group allows mothers to bring their children along to the session, thus absolving the need for a babysitter or childcare. This represents only one example in which social groups are developed around parental identity.

While a shared sense of parental identity may bring spouses together individually or in groups, they can also generate feelings of exclusivity to those without children. Harper recognizes her recent entrance into military life and the life lessons she has yet to learn, but she wishes this would not affect her social relationships as much as it does:

"I'm 22 years old and I have not been married for very long. I get along with people my own age much more than I get along with people who have kids and have been married for over, like, 15 years. I know what I'm about to say is definitely a generalization and it does not speak for all the spouses, everyone's different. But I found the majority of people who are married with kids [maintain the air that] if you're not married, you don't have kids, and you haven't been settled down for as long as they've been settled down, it's like you're viewed as less than. I know I'll never fully 100% 'get it' till I have kids, but there definitely is a disconnect with some of the older spouses."

While Harper is experiencing the "disconnect" from the spouses older than her, Danielle has been on both sides of the parental identity and shares how the experience of having a child changed her view:

"I didn't really feel excluded from women that had children because I love children. I just gravitate towards them. But, in some cases, it is a little different because you can't relate to people who do have kids. They don't ask you for advice. Now having a kid, I completely understand everything that those women went through. It's beneficial to have someone who is going through the same thing that you're going through. I understand in that aspect why I wasn't in their little circle. I still had friends who had children, and I babysat for them. It just depends."

In returning to Facebook groups, there are pages that are solely dedicated to military mothers raising children overseas. Spouses who are pregnant or have children ask each other for advice regarding pediatricians or making decisions about returning to the US to give birth. For spouses with children, these are questions that only other parents can answer. Furthermore, as children age and require friends, it is beneficial for parents to have social connections with other parents and arrange playdates. This is only further heightened in the event that spouses do not work while living overseas. In becoming a stay-at-home parent, life can feel as if it is revolving around the schedules of children.

The most important communities that these spouses found for themselves came from a place of shared identity. These identities could be based on career choices, interests, religious affiliation, a volunteer position, or being a parent. They all have a handful of things in common: 1) they provide a sense of purpose, 2) they are not widespread identities (such as military affiliation), and 3) they are continuations of identities that existed before the move overseas or they replace an identity that was lost during the move.

## Conclusion

This thesis highlights the unique challenges faced by military spouses living on overseas US bases; these challenges go beyond, yet are exacerbated by, external factors such as distance from friends and family, the stress of moving, navigating a foreign language and culture, and/or

facing unemployment. I argue that these external stressors result in the greatest challenge faced by military spouses overseas: identity loss. Relocation overseas represents one form of life transition described in the Social Identity Model of Identity Change in which connections to prior identities, such as one's occupation or relationship with friends and family, are weakened or lost completely. As a result, military spouses must draw on existing identities that traverse the life transition or formulate new identities. The participants in this study most commonly found community by relating to other military spouses living abroad with similar interests and/or a shared parental identity. Additionally, two spouses were able to make social connections with members of the host country through their shared occupational status and membership with a volunteer group. To overcome identity loss, military spouses must be resilient and willing to seek out opportunities. This thesis adds to the growing literature regarding military families by centering the military spouse as they form social connections and thereby improve the overall health and well-being of the military family unit.

While I attempted to develop this thesis in a manner that would best represent the experiences of overseas military spouses, I would be remiss if I did not fully elaborate on the limitations of this research. Firstly, all interview participants identified as female with one survey respondent identifying as male and another refraining from sharing such information. The experiences presented in this thesis largely represent the experiences of being a female-identifying spouse in a heterosexual marriage. The 2022 Department of Defense Demographic Report cites that 90.3% of active-duty spouses are female (United States Department of Defense, 2022, pg. v). As a result, the voices of male-identifying spouses remain largely absent in literature regarding military families and continue to be so in this thesis.

Secondly, spouses interviewed in this research frequently stated that their experiences varied based on the military installation they were located at. Military bases vary in size, overall population, average age of service members and their families, proximity to major cities/ a sense of remoteness, as well as a myriad of other factors. These differences affect the types of services offered to military families as well as overall perceptions of the on-base atmosphere. Survey and interview participants collectively discussed 7 military bases across 5 different countries. There are an estimated 750 overseas installations across 81 different countries; however, the vast majority of these remain inaccessible to military families (Vine, Deppen & Blogger, 2021). Regardless, I was unable to create a sample population that is truly representative of the multitude of overseas bases a military spouse may be located on. Finally, I did not ask for spouses to disclose any racial or ethnic identity. As a result, I cannot make any claims that would support or deny differences in experiences that may occur along racial and/or ethnic divisions.

Despite these limitations, the findings of this thesis have a multitude of implications within the structure of the US Department of Defense. At this moment in time, the US military is experiencing what may be described as a "recruitment slump." 2014 marks the most recent year that the US military met its recruitment goals across all branches of the military (Congressional Research Service, 2015). In September of 2023, the DoD announced that the US military missed the recruitment goal by 16% (United States Department of Defense, 2023). In an attempt to increase recruitment, Secretary of the Army, the Honorable Christine Wormuth, cites the following measures to go into effect: the creation of positions for full-time recruiters, targeting individuals with an education higher than a high school diploma, and increasing data collection regarding recruitment to further develop policy (Schifrin, 2023). Missing from these tactics is any mention of improving opportunities for military families. In 2022, just under half (49.9%) of

all active-duty service members reported being married. As evident by this statistic, service members desire to balance their occupation with the opportunity to have a family. Additionally, as mentioned above, the satisfaction of current military families is at an all-time low resting at 49% (Office of People Analytics, 2023, p. 41). Coupling the decade-long low military recruitment, the desire for service members to be married, and the low satisfaction with the military lifestyle, I would encourage the US Department of Defense to increase the number and quality of opportunities and services offered to the spouses of US service members. As seen from the findings of this paper, military spouses desire work opportunities that allow them to utilize their experience and/or education that additionally cover the costs of childcare, they desire social/interest/informational/structural spousal groups that forbid the leaching of the rank-enforced hierarchical structure, and they desire services that encourage connections with members of the host country.

Additionally, unrest at sites of overseas military installations has been a persistent issue since their inception, especially within the last 80 years (Yeo, 2017). The experiences of military spouses in this text showcase two persisting attitudes: 1) the desire to learn the local language and/or culture but being overwhelmed by the immensity of such a goal and 2) the clashing of cultures and/or resistance by members of the host country that dissuades cross-cultural social connections. These two attitudes result in the same implication for the US Department of Defense. I would encourage the DoD to expand community outreach programs on overseas bases. Military spouses express positive experiences with members of the host country when interactions are frequent. I would argue that the DoD should pay special attention to any opportunity that would allow military families to interact, share services, and/or communicate regularly with members of the host country. This may ultimately lead to better perceptions of the

US military overseas, better perceptions of members of the host country by US military families, and greater social and professional connections between the two groups.

Finally, the findings of this thesis point to a number of research questions that remain unanswered in academic literature. As previously mentioned, the literature surrounding the experiences of military spouses is relatively sparse. Especially lacking are the experiences of spouses identifying as male, non-binary, and/or LGBTQ. These groups represent minorities in military society that may face unique challenges. Furthermore, this study suggests that performance reviews of existing services for military families may uncover distinct weaknesses and/or strengths that either undermine or encourage community formation. Lastly, this thesis centers on military spouses living at a unique international site. It does not, however, give voice to members of the host country and their experiences with the presence of a US military base and its personnel. This counterview is largely missing from discussions about overseas military installations, yet critically important.

The United States military is one of the most powerful institutions in the world; the lives affected by such an institution go far beyond active-duty service members. As a result, it is worthwhile to examine every aspect as well as its reach. The US military is a complex and dynamic institution made up of millions of individuals; to fully engage in conversations, arguments, and critiques of it, we must also consider the roughly 580,000 military spouses that care for, support, and encourage the troops (United States Department of Defense, 2022). Military Spouses represent one important, yet often overlooked, piece of the greater US military puzzle.

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## Appendix

**Table of Military Terms Used**

| Term | Acronym | Branch of the Military | Definition/Purpose |
|---|---|---|---|
| Military Spouse | MilSpouse | All Branches | Spouses of US service members that are not active-duty. |
| Soldier & Family Readiness Group (formerly Soldier Readiness Group) | SFRG | Army | All family members, soldiers, volunteers, and civilian employees within a given unit are organized into a SFRG. The purpose of the SFRG is to ensure that information is disseminated to all individuals on-base. SFRGs can also provide a network of support and/or be a point of social connection. |
| Key Spouse Program | | Air Force | Similar to SFRGs, the key spouse is a spouse within a particular unit that volunteers to pass information from command to family members. They also may be called upon during times of need. |
| Family Readiness Program | | Marines | The Family Readiness Program provides support and |

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| | | | information to US marines and their families. |
| Military Sponsor Program | | All Branches | Sponsors are individuals that are well-versed in the military lifestyle. They help newcomers prepare and settle into their new duty station. |
| Spouses' Club | | All Branches | Available at most bases, the Spouses Club is a non-profit organization run by and for the purposes of military spouses living at a particular military installation. Spouses' Clubs typically offer a variety of information sessions to adapt to the new location, interest groups (such as book clubs or knitting clubs), provide volunteer opportunities, and donate to charitable causes. Military spouses can choose to participate in Spouses' Club activities or abstain. |
| Permanent Change of Station | PCS | All Branches | Official orders signifying to which duty station a US service member is moving to and when they need to arrive. Orders may be accompanied or |

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| | | | unaccompanied, especially when moving overseas. Unaccompanied orders signify that immediate family members (spouse and children) are not permitted to move. |
| Outside of the Continental US | OCONUS | All Branches | Used to describe any military installation that does not reside in the continental United States. Bases in Alaska and Hawaii are considered OCONUS. |
| Morale, Welfare, and Recreation Program | MWR | All Branches | MWR provides leisure and hospitality programs to US service members and their families around the world. Their services are multifaceted and include travel opportunities, sports teams for children and adults, connections to recreation groups off-base, and support groups. |

**Survey questions:**

1. Please answer the following question(s) regarding demographics:
    a. What is your current age?
    b. What is your gender identity?
    c. Are you a US citizen?
    d. Is English your native language?
    e. Have you ever been employed by the US Department of Defense directly?

    f. What is your current level of education?
    g. What is your current occupation?
2. Please answer the following question(s) regarding your personal history with the US military:
    a. At this time, how many years (total) have you been affiliated with the US military?
    b. How many different overseas military bases has your spouse been stationed at that you have also joined? Please name the base(s).
    c. How many (collective) years did you spend living on/near an overseas military base?
3. Please answer the following question(s) regarding services offered to military spouses while living on an overseas military base(s):
    a. What are the names of programs or services offered to you by the US military in order for you (as a spouse) to prepare for and/or to support you while abroad?
    b. How many of these programs did you find to be successful or useful?
4. Please answer the following question(s) regarding services offered to military spouses on returning to the US:
    a. What are the names of support/adjustment programs/services offered to you (as a spouse) upon return to the United States?
    b. How many of these programs did you find to be successful or useful?
5. Please answer the following question(s) regarding initial housing arrangements:
    a. Upon arrival at the overseas base, did you choose to live on-post or off-post?
    b. Were you given the choice to live on-post/off-post or was that predetermined?
6. Please answer the following question(s) regarding housing arrangement changes (dependent on time, location, and/or preference):
    a. If you have lived on/near multiple overseas bases, did your initial living arrangements differ depending on the base? If yes, how so? Was this due to a personal preference? Please name the base(s) you are referring to.
    b. During your time living on/near an overseas military base, did you at any time change your living arrangements? If yes, how so?
    c. What was the reasoning for changing your living arrangements, if applicable?
7. Please answer the following question(s) regarding time spent off-post:
    a. How frequently did you leave the military base?
    b. What kinds of interactions were these off-post visits (grocery store visits, social gatherings, sightseeing, shopping, recreation)?
8. Please answer the following question(s) regarding interactions with members of the host country:
    a. What was the frequency with which you interacted with members of the host country?
    b. Did you create friendships/other relationships with members of the host country? If yes, what kinds of relationships (formal, interpersonal, etc.)?
9. Please answer the following question(s) regarding the opinions of the host country on the presence of a US military base:
    a. Describe the opinions of the host country and its members regarding the presence of the US military base (hostile, peaceful, etc.). Please Include which base(s) you are referring to.

    b. Did these opinions affect your interactions with members of the host country?
10. Please answer the following question(s) regarding the separation of the host country and the military base:
    a. How would you describe the separation between life on-base and life in the host country?
    b. Was there a distinct cultural separation?
    c. What were the commonly held attitudes of both parties (US military and host country)?
    d. Did this vary by base? If so, how? Please name the base(s) you are referring to.
11. Please answer the following question(s) regarding family and personal life abroad:
    a. During your time abroad, what was your occupation?
    b. Did you and your spouse have children that joined you overseas?
12. Please answer the following question(s) regarding the on-base community/communities:
    a. Describe the overall community on base.
    b. In your opinion, which factors were most influential in creating a sense of community?
    c. Which community/communities did you find to be the most helpful and supportive (fellow US military spouses, members of the host country, and/or other communities not mentioned)?
13. Please answer the following question(s) regarding community changes:
    a. How did these communities form/change during the time you were abroad?
    b. Did they not change in any noticeable way?
14. Please answer the following question(s) regarding communities during transitions:
    a. Did you feel that the community of fellow military spouses was necessary and/or helpful in transitioning from the US to an overseas base? Please elaborate.
    b. Which communities were most helpful to your transition back to the US?
15. Please answer the following question(s) regarding relationships after returning to the US:
    a. Did you stay in contact with fellow spouses and/or members of the host country at the end of an overseas stationing?
16. Please provide any additional information that you feel is relevant.
17. If you would be willing to participate in a short (15-20 min) virtual interview, please leave your email below. I will contact you at a later date about scheduling.