

## **Marital Problems in the Military: Uncovering Gender and Dual Military Marriage Differences**

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## **Abstract**

Active duty women are married to other active duty members and divorce at higher rates than active duty men. Despite these known gender differences in military marriage types and although military theoretical frameworks acknowledge servicewomen's different family structures, little is known about the types of marital problems that active duty men and women face, how problems differ by gender, and challenges potentially unique to dual-married members. This study utilized 2017 Air Force Community Feedback Tool data to examine gender differences in married active duty members' (n=28,745) reports of romantic relationship difficulties experienced over the previous year (e.g., divorce, communication problems, abuse, changing roles, living far apart). Results indicate that servicewomen report all problems at higher rates than servicemen, and that dual married members report more and different problems than members with civilian spouses. Implications for future research, policy and programming, as well as leadership and clinical practice are discussed.

**Key words:** Military, Women, Dual Military Marriage, Divorce, Marital Therapy

## **Gender Differences in Active Duty Members' Marital Problems**

Half of all active duty members are married (Department of Defense [DoD], 2021), but little is known about military members' most common marital strengths and challenges. Military members' marital satisfaction and problems have been linked to turnover, divorce, mental health problems, and military readiness (Hawkins et al., 2018). The majority of research on military families has focused on "traditional" marriages – military men with civilian wives (e.g., Bourg & Segal, 1999; Edens et al., 2010; Hunter et al., 1981, Rosen et al., 1989). However emerging studies suggest that military women experience different marital challenges and higher divorce risk than their male colleagues (Hawkins et al., 2018). Improved understanding of military marital problems and of gender differences in marital problems is needed to improve military family support services, increase military therapists' awareness and efficacy, retain military families, and promote a more diverse, ready force.

### **Marital Satisfaction and Problems in the Civilian Context: Gender Differences**

Civilian literature highlights gender similarities and differences in factors influencing marital satisfaction. Both civilian men and women divorcing most commonly cite 'growing apart' and difficulties communicating with one another as reasons for divorce (Hawkins et al., 2012). A large scale meta-analysis found no significant gender differences in men's and women's overall marital satisfaction (Jackson et al., 2014), but women and men often report different problems in their marriages. For example, Amato and Rogers' (1997) longitudinal study found that wives more often reported challenges with their husbands' anger, drinking or using drugs, infidelity, spending foolishly, and not communicating than husbands complained of these same problems in their wives. Consistent with wives' reports, husbands identified their own anger, infidelity, alcohol use, moodiness, and communication as problems, and husbands and wives similarly acknowledged wives' problematic behaviors, including easily hurt feelings, moodiness, anger and communication problems (Amato & Rogers, 1997).

In addition to specific marital complaints, couples' employment statuses and family structures also influence marital stability and satisfaction. For dual earning couples, both men's and women's satisfaction with household labor divisions is associated with increased marital satisfaction (Stevens et al.,

2004). Further, occupational gender make-up is related to marriage rates, as men's employment in predominately female occupations has been found to reduce men's odds of marriage, while women's employment in predominately male occupations was not related to their odds of marriage (McClintock, 2020). Finally, workplace stressors, such as increased time pressures at work, poor leadership relations and work-family conflict can negatively influence marital satisfaction (Mauno & Kinnunen, 1999).

For couples with children, increased job workload is associated with declines in marital satisfaction, with wives' satisfaction more affected by their spouses' job workloads than vice versa (van Steenbergen et al., 2011). And in families with one stay-at-home, non-earning parent and an out-of-home career working parent, both career and stay-at-home mothers report higher levels of stress and exhaustion than career and stay-at-home fathers (Zimmerman, 2000). These gender similarities and differences highlight the complexity of understanding and treating marital problems in the civilian population.

### **Marital Satisfaction and Problems in the Military Context**

In addition to known gender differences in the civilian context, some factors specific to military way of life (i.e., deployment experiences) likely impact marital quality but research findings are mixed. For example, a study of Army couples found that a history of deployment was associated with lower marital satisfaction (Karney & Trail, 2016). But, Pflieger et al. (2018) found that the only military-centric factor associated with lowered marital satisfaction in spouses of deployed service members was servicemembers' Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), while non-military factors such as lack of social support, caregiver burden, work-family conflict and financial strain were associated with spouses' reports of low marital quality. These mixed findings are likely due to gender differences in study samples and in military specific marriage experiences, as one study found that each month spent deployed increased deployed members' divorce risk, with the effect on servicewomen's risk greater than that for servicemen's (Negrusa et al., 2014).

Non-deployed Servicewomen are not immune to greater divorce risk. A study of 462,444 married enlisted members serving in all military branches found that the cumulative divorce hazard after 3 years of marriage for non-deployed females was 16.8% -- a rate significantly higher than the 7.3% risk for non-

deployed males (Negrusa et al., 2014). In fact, military women are three times more likely than military men to divorce (Gregg & Miah, 2011). Across heterosexual military marriage types and consistent across years studied, military women married to civilian men face the highest divorce risk (e.g., 8.4% in 2005), while military men with civilian wives face the lowest divorce risk (e.g., 2.7% in 2005; Karney & Crown, 2007).

### **Marriage in the Military**

Military marriage rates also differ by gender, and should be considered to fully understand gender differences in marital problems and their impacts. Servicemembers – particularly military women – marry younger than civilian men and women. For example, at age 21 approximately 8% of civilian men and 10% of civilian women are married, compared to 27% of servicemen and 34% of servicewomen (Clever & Segal, 2013). Despite this, active duty servicemen are married at a higher rate (51.2%) than active duty servicewomen (44%) (Department of Defense, 2021). Enlisted and officer marriage rates also differ by gender, as 72% of male officers versus 52% of female officers are married, and 55% of enlisted men versus 45% of enlisted women are married (Clever & Segal). The difference in military men's and women's marriage rates expands over the course of military service. After the age of 21, servicewomen's marriage rates decline to rates lower than civilians' and servicemen's, while servicemen's marriage rates surge past civilians'. By the age of 44, approximately 88% of military men are married, compared to 74% of civilian men, 64% of civilian women, and just 51% of military women (Clever & Segal).

Gender differences in military marriage rates are primarily attributable to military women's higher divorce rates and women's higher attrition from military service when they start a family (Clever & Segal, 2013). In addition, military women's career trajectories are affected by their higher dual-military marriage rate. Specifically, although dual military marriages account for only 13% of all DoD marriages, 44.8% of married active duty servicewomen are dual-married, compared to only 8% of married active duty servicemen (DoD, 2021). Dual military marriages have been found to place unique strains on couples, including navigating dual career trajectories, spending less time together, and having fewer children than desired (Smith & Segal, 2013). Given servicewomen's significantly higher rates of dual

military marriage, women are disproportionately burdened by dual-military-unique challenges (Segal & Lane, 2016).

Non-dual married military couples also face unique challenges that may disproportionately affect women. For example, civilian military husbands and wives are both under-employed and unemployed at higher rates than civilian peers with the same education and work experience (Lim & Schulker, 2010; Meadows et al., 2015), but civilian military husbands report more dissatisfaction with their employment situations than civilian military wives (Cooney et al., 2011). Thus, military members married to civilian husbands – disproportionately servicewomen – face more spousal frustration at home regarding under/un-employment status than members married to civilian wives (disproportionately servicemen).

These gender differences in military marriage demographics and dynamics highlight likely differences in active duty women's marital experiences and their effects. For example, servicewomen may experience less access to spouse day-to-day support (i.e., more are geographically separated from dual-military spouses), identify different marital problems, and receive less spouse support for continuing their military careers compared to male military peers (Massello, 2007; Southwell & Wadsworth, 2016).

### **Strong Marriages Improve Retention, Wellness and Readiness**

Across military and civilian contexts, higher marital quality and fewer marital problems are associated with more favorable career and health outcomes (Hawkins et al., 2018; Proulx & Snyder-Rivas, 2013; Rogers & May, 2004). For civilian men and women, marital satisfaction has been shown to relate to increased job satisfaction (Rogers & May, 2004). Closer examination of the relationship between marital quality and job satisfaction indicates that marital satisfaction in civilian samples is closely linked to spouses' support for their partners' personal goals and careers, and greater spousal career support is associated with greater career retention (Kao et al., 2005; Salmela-Aro et al., 2010).

Marital quality's link to career retention is important in the military context, as the military system promotes leaders from within its ranks. Studies with military samples indicate that spouse support to continue military careers (Bowen, 1986a), work-family conflict (Dupre & Day, 2007), marital satisfaction and problems (Rosen & Durand, 1995; Schumm et al., 2001), and dual military marriage

status impact members' career satisfaction, deployment readiness and retention (King et al., 2019; King et al., 2020; Welsh et al., 2015).

Marital satisfaction also affects physical health. Research suggests that higher marital quality is associated with improved self-reported health for both men and women over time (Proulx & Snyder-Rivas, 2013). Also, marital dissatisfaction is prospectively associated with mortality, as individuals who describe their relationships as happy have lower annualized odds of dying; thus, improved marital satisfaction may increase longevity (Whisman et al., 2018). In the military context, marital satisfaction's link with both physical and mental health is important because military members' ability to deploy and be retained is dependent on their ability to meet military-specific physical and mental wellness standards.

Marital quality also impacts mental health. In the military context, greater family support is linked to fewer mental health problems in servicemembers (Hawkins et al., 2018). Healthy marriages also appear to protect military members against PTSD (Creech et al., 2016), depression (Gradus et al., 2015), deployment challenges and stress (Allen et al., 2010), while enhancing mission readiness (Welsh et al., 2015), job performance (Carter et al., 2015), and help-seeking (Meis et al., 2010).

Marital quality also impacts military spouses' mental health. Periods of geographic separations for military trainings or deployments require military spouses to change roles and re-establish routines during reintegration – a unique challenge that may increase mental health risks and undermine marital quality (Hawkins et al., 2018). Military spouses report stresses amplified by such separations, including taking care of children, taking on roles at home on top of already being employed, and caring for service members after deployments – factors that may impact spouses' marital satisfaction and their support for members continuing their military careers (Dimiceli et al., 2010). Additionally, both spouses of and military members themselves report difficulties with changing roles after periods of separation, as creating new role norms can foster resentment (Lapp et al., 2010; Williamson, 2012). Complicating our understanding of deployments' impacts on marital and spouse wellness, civilian military husbands' challenges often differ from civilian military wives', as wives report more demands in the household (Massello, 2007) and more depressive symptoms (Southwell & Wadsworth, 2016), while husbands report

more work hours, lower social support, lower marital satisfaction, and less support for their spouses' continued military careers (Massello, 2007; Southwell & Wadsworth, 2016).

Taken together, evidence suggests that encouraging and enabling healthy military marriages can improve the health and readiness of married military members and the broader force. However the lack of military-specific research in this area impairs the development of a focused and nuanced understanding of gender differences in military marital problems. Thus, this study aims to investigate gender differences in married active duty Air Force members' marital problems as a means to inform military marital/family screening, support and counseling services.

## **Theory**

Both the family and military systems have been described as “greedy institutions”, demanding significant commitment, loyalty, time and energy from its members (Segal, 1986). Segal and colleagues' (2015) conceptual framework of military career and family life course events is anchored in life course theory (Elder, 1986), acknowledging interconnectedness between individual members' and the larger military organizations' continuous evolution and wellbeing. The model includes four rings – military life course, family life course, child life course, and unexpected major events – making clear the links between the military context, family wellness, servicemember wellness and decisions, and military outcomes (e.g. unit health, readiness, retention; Segal et al., 2015).

Expanding this understanding further, Segal and Lane (2016) modified the model to account for servicewomen's unique family experiences. The women's model includes a ring addressing reproductive issues and also acknowledges women's high rates of dual military marriages by adding an optional additional ring – a second military life course ring for dual military spouses. By adding the ring, the model acknowledges the potential influence of spouses' military careers on women's marital wellness, family decisions, individual wellness, and career decisions/outcomes.

Although both conceptual models posit that different life course rings intersect at points which vary for each individual (e.g., impacts of marriage or having children are likely affected by timing of military moves and deployments and vice versa), as the literature on gender differences in service

member's marital problems is lacking, this study is not limited to a single career course point. Rather, we examine all ranks and ages, focusing on gender differences in endorsed marital problems with special attention to the risk or protection afforded by dual-military status. Based on both the conceptual models and existing literature, we hypothesize that:

*Hypothesis 1:* Married active duty women will report more marital problems than married active duty men.

*Hypothesis 2:* Dual military married members will report more and different problems than non-dual married members.

*Hypothesis 3:* Non-dual married women will endorse more romantic relationship problems than non-dual married men.

*Hypothesis 4:* Dual military members will endorse problems more consistent with opposite gender dual military members than with their same-gender non-dual military peers.

## **Methods**

This study utilized the Air Force (AF) Community Feedback Tool (CFT) to examine gender differences in active duty married servicemembers' past year romantic relationship difficulties (Department of the AF, 2017). The 2017 CFT was an online community needs assessment survey delivered via email on behalf of the Assistant Vice Chief of Staff of the AF to all active duty, Guard and Reserve AF members and civilian employees between August and October 2017 (Department of the AF, 2017). Survey participants clicked a link and entered a unique code to access their survey, which collected demographic information and information regarding individual and community problems and needs supports (Department of the AF, 2017).

Of the 81,488 respondents, 41,635 were active duty members, of which 28,808 (69%) endorsed being married. Gender was identified through a single item: "Are you" with two response options: "male" and "female." Sixty-three respondents who did not answer this question were excluded from analyses (0.22%), leaving 23,094 (80.3%) responding male and 5,651 (19.7%) responding female. Dual military status was identified using a single item: "Which of the following describe you", when an active duty

respondent checked “spouse of a U.S. service member” (n=774, 2.7% of the married active duty sample). Non-dual married members constituted the active duty married respondents who did not identify as a spouse of a service member (n=27,971, 97.3% of the sample), using a recoded variable (1=dual married; 0=non-dual married).

Romantic relationship problems were identified through a series of options following the statement: “Please select any of the following romantic relationship issues that were a problem in the past year.” Response options included: “Divorce/marital separation/end of relationship”, “Communicating or expressing feelings to one another”, “Growing apart, in different directions”, “Arguments”, “Verbal, physical and/or sexual abuse”, “Infidelity (cheating)”, “Little or no physical affection”, “Changing roles or responsibilities in the family/marriage”, and “Problems due to having to live far away from your spouse/your partner”. Respondents could endorse all relevant problems by checking the box next to the item. Checked boxes indicated ‘yes I experienced this romantic relationship problem’ and were coded as “1”; unchecked boxes indicated ‘no I did not experience this romantic relationship problem’ and were coded as “0”. The final response option: “I did not experience any listed Romantic Relationship Problems” was coded so that “1” indicated no marital problems and “0” indicated at least one marital problem. An additional variable, “Sum of marital problem types endorsed” was created by computing the sum of all marital problem types respondents’ endorsed.

The general hypotheses were broken down into sub-hypotheses to guide statistical testing and results reporting. General and sub-hypotheses were as follows:

**HYPOTHESIS 1: Married active duty women will report more marital problems than married active duty men. (Table 1)**

1a: A higher percentage of women will endorse types of problems consistent with problems endorsed by civilian women (i.e., infidelity, communication) and military women (i.e., marital separation/divorce, changing roles/responsibilities, and geographical separation) than men.

1b: The average number of problems women report will be statistically higher than the average number of problems men report.

1c: A higher percentage of men will report no marital problems compared to women.

**HYPOTHESIS 2: Dual military married members will report more and different problems than non-dual married members. (Table 2)**

2a: A significantly higher percentage of dual military members will endorse types of problems likely amplified in dual military marriages (i.e., difficulties with role changes, geographic separations) than non-dual military members.

2b: The average number of problems dual military married members report will be statistically higher than the average number of problems non-dual married members report.

2c: A higher percentage of non-dual married members will report no marital problems compared to dual married.

**HYPOTHESIS 3: Non-dual married women will endorse more romantic relationship problems than non-dual married men. (Table 3)**

3a: A significantly higher percentage of non-dual married women will report all types of marital problems than non-dual married men.

3b: The average number of problems non-dual married women report will be statistically higher than the average number of problems non-dual married men report.

3c: A higher percentage of non-dual married men will report experiencing no marital problems compared to non-dual married women.

**HYPOTHESIS 4: Dual military members will endorse problems more consistent with opposite gender dual military members than with their same-gender non-dual military peers. (Table 3)**

4a: A significantly higher percentage of dual military men will endorse types of problems likely amplified in dual military marriages (i.e., difficulties with role changes, geographic separations) compared to non-dual military men.

4b: A significantly higher percentage of non-dual men will report experiencing no marital problems compared to dual-military men.

4c: A similar percentage (not statistically different) of dual military men and dual military women will endorse all types of marital problems.

To test these hypotheses, percentages of the full sample that endorsed each romantic relationship problem were calculated. Next, gender differences were examined by splitting the sample by male/female and separately calculating the percentage of problems endorsed by each subgroup and calculating chi squares and independent samples t-tests to identify statistically significant gender differences. Third, the sample was split to examine percentages of problems endorsed by dual married and non-dual married respondents; chi square and independent samples t-tests tests were calculated to identify statistically significant differences between the two groups. Finally, romantic relationship problems were examined between subgroups of dual and non-dual married men and women, and chi squares and independent samples t-tests were calculated to test for statistically significant differences between subgroups.

## **Results**

Table 1 includes total and subsample percentages of respondents who endorsed each type of romantic relationship problem, the average sum of relationship problems endorsed, and the percentage of those who denied experiencing any marital problems. Differences in percentages and means were tested for statistical significance using Chi Square and independent samples t-tests.

### **HYPOTHESIS 1: Married active duty women will report more marital problems than married active duty men (Table 1).**

Statistically significant differences between gender were found in the total sample. Testing Hypothesis 1a found that significantly more women compared to men reported marital problems more commonly cited by civilian women, including: Communicating or expressing feelings (25.6% vs. 21.7%),  $\chi^2=39.11, p<.001$ , Infidelity (3.8% vs. 2.1%),  $\chi^2=54.45, p<.001$ , and Verbal/Physical/Sexual Abuse (2.3% vs. 1.3%),  $\chi^2=33.33, p<.001$ . In addition, significantly more women compared to men reported marital problems commonly cited by military women, including: Divorce/marital separation (4.5% vs. 2.8%),  $\chi^2=45.24, p<.001$ , Changing roles or responsibilities (20.6% vs. 10.5%)  $\chi^2=427.82, p<.001$  and Problems due to having to live far away from spouse (12.2% vs. 7.5%),  $\chi^2=131.43, p<.001$ .

Testing Hypothesis 1b and 1c revealed that women averaged a significantly greater number of marital problem types ( $M = 1.2$ ,  $SD = 1.67$ ) than men ( $M = .95$ ,  $SD = 1.49$ ),  $t(11.17)$ ,  $p < .001$ . Further, men reported experiencing no marital problems at higher rates than women (57% vs. 55.4%;  $\chi^2 = 124.44$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

**HYPOTHESIS 2: Dual military married members will report more and different problems than non-dual married military members.**

Differences between members in dual military marriages versus those in non-dual military marriages were analyzed using variables assumed to be amplified by/idiosyncratic to dual military marriages (see Table 2). Testing Hypothesis 2a found that a higher percentage of members in dual military marriages compared to those in non-dual military marriages reported: Problems due to having to live far away from spouse' (18% vs 8.2%,  $\chi^2 = 93.99$ ,  $p < .001$ ) and Changing roles or responsibilities (20.8% vs. 12.3%,  $\chi^2 = 50.39$ ,  $p < .001$ ). In addition, a higher percentage of dual married members reported Difficulties communicating or expressing feelings compared to non-dual married members (28.9% vs 22.3%;  $\chi^2 = 19.30$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Testing Hypothesis 2b revealed that the average number of marital problem types endorsed by non-dual married respondents ( $M = .99$ ,  $SD = 1.53$ ) was statistically lower than that of dual respondents ( $M = 1.24$ ,  $SD = 1.63$ ),  $t(4.38)$ ,  $p < .001$ . Examining Hypothesis 2c showed that a higher percentage of non-dual members endorsed no marital problems (55.7%) compared to dual married members (45.1%;  $\chi^2 = 34.27$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

**HYPOTHESIS 3: Non-dual married women will endorse more romantic relationship problems than non-dual married men.**

Differences between marital problems endorsed by non-dual married men and women are displayed in Table 3. Testing Hypothesis 3a, a significantly higher percentage of non-dual married women endorsed every type of marital problem compared to non-dual men with the exception of arguments and little or no physical affection. The greatest gender gaps in non-dual married members' problems endorsed were problems due to Changing roles or responsibilities in the marriage (20.5% non-

dual women vs. 10.4% non-dual men;  $\chi^2=396.73, p<.001$ ) and having to live far away from spouse (11.6% non-dual women vs. 7.4% non-dual men;  $\chi^2=102.58, p<.001$ ).

Testing Hypothesis 3b found that non-dual married women's mean number of problem types endorsed was significantly greater (1.67%) than non-dual married men (1.49%;  $t=10.66, p<.001$ ).

Examination of Hypothesis 3b revealed non-dual men denied experiencing any marital problems at significantly higher rates than non-dual women (57.2% men vs 49.2% women;  $\chi^2=108.32, p<.001$ )

**HYPOTHESIS 4: Dual military members will endorse problems more consistent with opposite gender dual military members than with their same-gender non-dual military peers.**

Examining Hypothesis 4a regarding differences between dual married and non-dual married men revealed differences in marital problems expected to be amplified by/idiosyncratic to dual military marriages (see Table 3). Specifically, dual married men endorsed Changing roles or responsibilities (18.2%) at a higher rate than non-dual married men (10.4%  $\chi^2=16.61, p<.001$ ) and Problems due to having to live far away from spouse (18.2% versus 7.4%;  $\chi^2=43.37, p<.001$ ).

Testing of Hypothesis 4b revealed that a lower percentage of dual married men reported experiencing no marital problems (45.3%) compared to non-dual married men reporting no marital problems (57.2%;  $\chi^2=14.86, p<.001$ ). Finally, examination of Hypothesis 4c revealed no statistically significant gender differences in the percentages of dual married men and dual married women's endorsement of different romantic relationship problem types nor their average total number of problem types endorsed.

## **Discussion**

Results confirm Hypothesis 1. Specifically, married active duty women reported more problems with divorce/martial separation, communicating, growing apart, abuse, infidelity, changing roles, living far from spouse. Gender differences were not statistically significant in men's and women's reports of arguments and little or no physical affection in their marriages. Women also averaged more marital problem types than men, while men reported not experiencing any marital problems at significantly higher rates.

Results also confirm Hypothesis 2. Specifically, dual military married members reported more difficulties with communicating, changing roles and responsibilities, and living far away. Additionally, dual married members averaged more marital problem types, and non-dual members reported experiencing no problems at significantly higher rates.

Results also confirm Hypothesis 3. Specifically, non-dual married women endorse more problems with divorce and marital separation, communication, growing apart, abuse, infidelity, changing roles or responsibilities, and living far away than non-dual married men. Additionally, non-dual women averaged more marital problem types and non-dual men reported experiencing no problems at a higher rate.

Finally, results confirm Hypothesis 4. Specifically, a dual married men reported problems likely amplified by dual marriage than non-dual men, including changing roles and responsibilities and living far away. Further, dual married men average more marital problem types and reported experiencing no marital problems at lower rates than non-dual men. Dual military members also endorsed problems more consistent with opposite gender dual military members than with their same-gender non-dual military peers, as dual men and dual women endorsed every type of marital problem at similar rates (no statistically significant difference).

The problem endorsed at the highest rate across all subgroups was communicating or expressing feelings. This problem is common in non-military contexts (Amato & Rogers, 1997; Hawkins et al., 2012), but our results indicate that women and dual-military members endorse more communication problems than men and non-dual subgroups. It is unclear if these differences in communication problems are due to openness to report such problems, contextual challenges that disproportionately affect women and dual married members (i.e., geo-separation impacting communication), and/or socially ingrained gender or military differences in communication patterns.

Two marital problems—arguments and little physical affection—were endorsed at high rates across all sub-groups. The consistent reporting of these problems across groups may indicate that such challenges are more universal interpersonal struggles, rather than context-driven. Still, awareness of these as common problems across the force may inform prevention and clinical interventions.

Dual status appears to close the gender gap in problems experienced. Still, both dual married men and women reported greater rates of some problems that appear contextual, including changing roles or responsibilities and living apart from spouse than non-dual married members. Thus, dual married members' unique challenges may be mitigated through targeted policy or process changes.

### **Limitations**

This study is limited by its cross-sectional design in that causal relationships between variables cannot be determined. Additionally, the proportion of dual married members in this study's sample is significantly lower than the known proportion in the active duty force. This lower proportion resulted in subsample sizes that may be insufficient to capture potentially significant differences across cross-tab cells and gender subgroups. In addition, the survey data used for this study captured binary sex (male/female), excluding options to identify as non-binary or to identify gender (versus sex). Respondents who did not answer the sex question were excluded from analyses (.22% of the sample), and the terms "men" and "women" were used throughout in accordance with APA writing guidelines. Thus, gender differences identified in this study should be interpreted as self-identified sex differences. Finally, the survey did not capture opposite versus same sex or gender marriages, limiting ability to examine potential differences in problems reported in same- versus opposite-gender relationship problems.

### **Implications**

This is the first known study to examine gender differences in marital problems in a large active duty sample. While it confirms some civilian research findings, such as women endorsing more marital problems than men, the differences across sub-groups warrant further examination. For example, communication problems are significantly higher among dual members and, particularly dual married women, but the reasons behind these differences are unclear. Research exploring potential links between contextual and interpersonal marital problems, such as if/how geographic separation impacts communication problems and role changes, is needed.

In the meantime, some contextual factors disproportionately impacting women and dual couples can be addressed. Although military branches tout improvements in dual couples' joint assignment rates,

military statistics such as the Air Force's 96% match rate (Bailey, 2017) may fail to "count" families ineligible for supportive assignment policies. For example, in the Air Force, members in certain statuses do not qualify for joint assignments (Department of the AF, 2020). In order to improve both policy adherence and members' expectation management, clearer guidance on and transparent discussions around gaps in dual assignment coverage should be developed. Further, supports for all geographically separated couples, such as virtual marital counseling services or pre-separation counseling, might mitigate communication and role change challenges unique to those subpopulations.

In addition, although rates are small, women in all groups – particularly women in non-dual marriages – report higher risk of the most life- and safety-affecting marital problems, including divorce and abuse. Leaders and clinicians should be sensitive to women's higher risks, ask directly about support and safety at home, and remain aware of safety and support resources available to members.

Leadership and clinical practice implications around dual military couples' marital challenges are also evident. Leaders and clinicians should ask about members' dual military (or dual career) statuses, know if their members' families are geographically separated, and inquire about the potential impacts of these statuses on members' resources and demands at work and home. By offering support and flexibility to married members managing unique demands, leaders and clinicians may favorably influence their wellness, marriage quality, daily work performance, readiness and retention (Dupre & Day, 2007; Hawkins et al., 2018; King et al., 2019; King et al., 2020; Proulx & Snyder-Rivas, 2013; Rogers & May, 2004; Rosen & Durand, 1995; Schumm et al., 2001; Welsh et al., 2015).

Segal (1986) described both the military and the family as greedy institutions, as they demand members' commitment, loyalty, time, and energy, creating tension with other institutions. Further, Segal asserted that the family institution is greedier with women. Consistent with Segal's theory, this study found women and dual married men (whose spouses also answer directly to the military's greedy demands) report more marital problems. Although Segal and Lane (2016) included an optional additional ring to account for dual-spouse military career tracks in their conceptual model of military women's life events and well-being, Segal and colleagues' (2015) broader conceptual framework of military career and

family life course events omitted a dual-spouse military career ring. In this way, dual married men's experiences and challenges are invisible. This study's findings suggest that dual marriage affects both men's and women's marital wellness, and although a lower proportion of servicemen are dual married, an optional additional ring in their theoretical framework should be considered.

From a policy perspective, acknowledging and mitigating stressors during the military institution's greediest events (e.g., deployment, extended training, assignment transitions) would likely benefit all members. Evidence suggests that, for those with families, improved system-wide support during periods of adjustment (e.g., military moves, deployments) focused on family needs (versus on internal resilience) would improve family career satisfaction (Shumm et al., 2001). Such efforts might include spouse career transition support, supplemental childcare, extra time for members to attend to family, tools to identify and mitigate challenges with role changes, and instrumental support in the home (e.g., assistance with specific household needs). Finally, as Segal and colleagues' (2015) model acknowledges, in order for policies, interventions, and leaders' efforts to be effectively implemented, both the broader military culture and local unit climates must consistently, actively communicate and demonstrate care for members and their families. By promoting healthy families of all structures, leaders enable mission readiness.

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|                                                           | <b>All<br/>N=28745<br/>n (%)<br/><i>mean (SD)</i></b> | <b>Men<br/>n=23094<br/>n (%)<br/><i>Mean (SD)</i></b> | <b>Women<br/>n=5651<br/>n (%)<br/><i>Mean (SD)</i></b> | <b>Chi Square<br/><i>t-test</i></b> |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Divorce/marital separation                                | 911 (3.2)                                             | 652 (2.8)                                             | 256 (4.5)                                              | 43.24***                            |
| Communicating or expressing feelings to one another       | 6470 (22.5)                                           | 5007 (21.7)                                           | 1444 (25.6)                                            | 39.11***                            |
| Growing apart, in different directions                    | 3489 (12.1)                                           | 2739 (11.9)                                           | 737 (13)                                               | 5.96*                               |
| Arguments                                                 | 6045 (21)                                             | 4831 (20.9)                                           | 1200 (21.2)                                            | .27                                 |
| Verbal, physical and/or sexual abuse                      | 429 (1.5)                                             | 296 (1.3)                                             | 131 (2.3)                                              | 33.33***                            |
| Infidelity (cheating)                                     | 701 (2.4)                                             | 485 (2.1)                                             | 214 (3.8)                                              | 54.45***                            |
| Little or no physical affection                           | 4748 (16.5)                                           | 3775 (16.3)                                           | 962 (17)                                               | 1.51                                |
| Changing roles or responsibilities in the family/marriage | 3596 (12.5)                                           | 2422 (10.5)                                           | 1166 (20.6)                                            | 427.82***                           |
| Problems due to having to live far away from spouse       | 2423 (8.4)                                            | 1729 (7.5)                                            | 690 (12.2)                                             | 131.43***                           |
| Sum of marital problem types endorsed (Range 0-9)         | <i>1.00 (1.53)</i>                                    | <i>.95 (1.49)</i>                                     | <i>1.20 (1.67)</i>                                     | <i>11.17***</i>                     |
| I did not experience any listed relationship problems     | 15962 (55.4)                                          | 13170 (57.0)                                          | 2759 (48.8)                                            | 124.44***                           |

Table 1. Married, Active Duty Air Force Members' Types of Romantic Relationship Problems Endorsed in the Past Year: Differences by Gender

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$

Table 2. Married, Active Duty Air Force Members' Types of Romantic Relationship Problems Endorsed in the Past Year: Differences by Non-Dual and Dual Military Married

|                                                           | <b>Non-Dual<br/>n=27971<br/>n (%)<br/><i>mean (SD)</i></b> | <b>Dual Married<br/>n=774<br/>n (%)<br/><i>mean (SD)</i></b> | <b>Chi Square<br/><i>t-test</i></b> |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Divorce/marital separation                                | 886 (3.2)                                                  | 22 (2.8)                                                     | .260                                |
| Communicating or expressing feelings to one another       | 6227 (22.3)                                                | 224 (28.9)                                                   | 19.30***                            |
| Growing apart, in different directions                    | 3384 (12.1)                                                | 92 (11.9)                                                    | .03                                 |
| Arguments                                                 | 5871 (21)                                                  | 160 (20.7)                                                   | .05                                 |
| Verbal, physical and/or sexual abuse                      | 415 (1.5)                                                  | 12 (1.6)                                                     | .02                                 |
| Infidelity (cheating)                                     | 673 (2.4)                                                  | 26 (3.4)                                                     | 2.88                                |
| Little or no physical affection                           | 4615 (16.5)                                                | 122 (15.8)                                                   | .30                                 |
| Changing roles or responsibilities in the family/marriage | 3427 (12.3)                                                | 161 (20.8)                                                   | 50.39***                            |
| Problems due to having to live far away from your spouse  | 2280 (8.2)                                                 | 139 (18)                                                     | 93.99***                            |
| Sum of marital problem types endorsed (Range 0-9)         | .99 (1.53)                                                 | 1.24 <sup>a</sup> (1.63)                                     | 4.38***                             |
| I did not experience any listed relationship problems     | 15580 (55.7)                                               | 349 (45.1)                                                   | 34.27***                            |

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

<sup>a</sup> Range 0-8 in dual military

Table 3. Married Active Duty Members' Marital Problems Endorsed in Past Year: Differences in Non Dual and Dual Married Men and Women

|                                                           | Comparing by Marriage Type                  |                                              |                                |                                           |                                             |                                | Comparing by Gender                                     |                                                         |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|--------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------|
|                                                           | Non-Dual Married                            |                                              |                                | Dual Married                              |                                             |                                | Men                                                     | Women                                                   |
|                                                           | Men<br>n=22836<br>n (%)<br><i>mean (SD)</i> | Women<br>n=5135<br>n (%)<br><i>mean (SD)</i> | Chi<br>Square<br><i>t-test</i> | Men<br>n=258<br>n (%)<br><i>mean (SD)</i> | Women<br>n=516<br>n (%)<br><i>mean (SD)</i> | Chi<br>Square<br><i>t-test</i> | Non-Dual vs.<br>Dual-Mil<br>Chi Square<br><i>t-test</i> | Non-Dual vs.<br>Dual-Mil<br>Chi Square<br><i>t-test</i> |
| Divorce/marital separation                                | 647 (2.8)                                   | 239 (4.7)                                    | 45.33***                       | 5 (1.9)                                   | 17 (3.3)                                    | 1.15                           | .75                                                     | 2.01                                                    |
| Communicating or expressing feelings to one another       | 4940 (21.6)                                 | 1287 (25.1)                                  | 28.51***                       | 67 (26)                                   | 157 (30.4)                                  | 1.66                           | 2.83                                                    | 7.09**                                                  |
| Growing apart, in different directions                    | 2709 (11.9)                                 | 675 (13.1)                                   | 6.48*                          | 30 (11.6)                                 | 62 (12)                                     | .03                            | .01                                                     | .53                                                     |
| Arguments                                                 | 4773 (20.9)                                 | 1098 (21.4)                                  | .586                           | 58 (22.5)                                 | 102 (19.8)                                  | .77                            | .39                                                     | .73                                                     |
| Verbal, physical and/or sexual abuse                      | 293 (1.3)                                   | 122 (2.4)                                    | 34.25***                       | 3 (1.2)                                   | 9 (1.7)                                     | .38                            | .03                                                     | .83                                                     |
| Infidelity (cheating)                                     | 479 (2.1)                                   | 194 (3.8)                                    | 50.42***                       | 6 (2.3)                                   | 20 (3.9)                                    | 1.27                           | .07                                                     | .01                                                     |
| Little or no physical affection                           | 3727 (16.3)                                 | 888 (17.3)                                   | 2.88                           | 48 (18.6)                                 | 74 (14.3)                                   | 2.36                           | .97                                                     | 2.89                                                    |
| Changing roles or responsibilities in the family/marriage | 2375 (10.4)                                 | 1052 (20.5)                                  | 396.73***                      | 47 (18.2)                                 | 114 (22.1)                                  | 1.57                           | 16.61***                                                | .74                                                     |
| Problems due to having to live far away from spouse       | 1682 (7.4)                                  | 598 (11.6)                                   | 102.58***                      | 47 (18.2)                                 | 92 (17.8)                                   | .02                            | 43.37***                                                | 16.73***                                                |
| Sum of marital problem types endorsed (Range 0-9)         | .95 (1.49)                                  | 1.20 (1.67)                                  | 10.66***                       | 1.21 <sup>a</sup> (1.64)                  | 1.25 <sup>b</sup> (1.62)                    | .39                            | 2.76**                                                  | .72                                                     |
| I did not experience any listed relationship problems     | 13053 (57.2)                                | 2527 (49.2)                                  | 108.32***                      | 117 (45.3)                                | 232 (45)                                    | .00                            | 14.86***                                                | 3.23                                                    |

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

<sup>a</sup> Range 0-7 in dual-married men

<sup>b</sup> Range 0-8 in dual-married women