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# Identification of Strong/Well Families and the Mechanisms to Support Them

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July 1990



United States Army  
Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences



# U.S. ARMY RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR THE BEHAVIORAL AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

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University of North Carolina

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| Accession For      |                                            |
| NTIS GRA&I         | <input checked="checked" type="checkbox"/> |
| DTIC TAB           | <input type="checkbox"/>                   |
| Unannounced        | <input type="checkbox"/>                   |
| Justification      |                                            |
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## REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE

Form Approved  
OMB No. 0704-0188

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|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| 1a. REPORT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION<br>Unclassified                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |                       |                                          | 1b. RESTRICTIVE MARKINGS<br>---                                                                                                                                           |                                                     |                               |
| 2a. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION AUTHORITY<br>---                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                       |                                          | 3. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY OF REPORT<br>Approved for public release;<br>distribution is unlimited.                                                                      |                                                     |                               |
| 2b. DECLASSIFICATION/DOWNGRADING SCHEDULE<br>---                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                       |                                          | 4. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S)<br>---                                                                                                                        |                                                     |                               |
| 5. MONITORING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER(S)<br>ARI Research Note 90-69                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                       |                                          | 6a. NAME OF PERFORMING ORGANIZATION<br>Research Triangle Institute                                                                                                        |                                                     |                               |
| 6b. OFFICE SYMBOL<br>(If applicable)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                       |                                          | 7a. NAME OF MONITORING ORGANIZATION<br>U.S. Army Research Institute for the<br>Behavioral and Social Sciences                                                             |                                                     |                               |
| 6c. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)<br>P.O. Box 12194<br>Research Triangle Park, NC 27709                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                       |                                          | 7b. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)<br>5001 Eisenhower Avenue<br>Alexandria, VA 22333-5600                                                                            |                                                     |                               |
| 8a. NAME OF FUNDING/SPONSORING<br>ORGANIZATION U.S. Army Research<br>Institute for the Behavioral<br>and Social Sciences                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |                       |                                          | 8b. OFFICE SYMBOL<br>(If applicable)<br>PERI-R                                                                                                                            |                                                     |                               |
| 9. PROCUREMENT INSTRUMENT IDENTIFICATION NUMBER<br>MDA903-87-C-0540                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                          |                       |                                          | 8c. ADDRESS (City, State, and ZIP Code)<br>5001 Eisenhower Avenue<br>Alexandria, VA 22333-5600                                                                            |                                                     |                               |
| 10. SOURCE OF FUNDING NUMBERS                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |                       |                                          | 11. TITLE (Include Security Classification)<br>Identification of Strong/Well Families and the Mechanisms to Support Them                                                  |                                                     |                               |
| PROGRAM<br>ELEMENT NO.<br>63731A                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             | PROJECT<br>NO.<br>792 | TASK<br>NO.<br>242                       | WORK UNIT<br>ACCESSION NO.<br>C2                                                                                                                                          |                                                     |                               |
| 12. PERSONAL AUTHOR(S)<br>Bowen, Gary L. (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                       |                       |                                          |                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                     |                               |
| 13a. TYPE OF REPORT<br>Final                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                 |                       | 13b. TIME COVERED<br>FROM 86/11 TO 87/07 |                                                                                                                                                                           | 14. DATE OF REPORT (Year, Month, Day)<br>1990, July |                               |
| 15. PAGE COUNT<br>26                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                       |                                          |                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                     |                               |
| 16. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTATION Contracting Officer's Representative, D. Bruce Bell; The University<br>of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is a sub-contractor for Research Triangle Institute and<br>is located at 223 E. Franklin Street 150A, Chapel Hill, NC 27514                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               |                       |                                          |                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                     |                               |
| 17. COSATI CODES                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                       |                                          | 18. SUBJECT TERMS (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number)                                                                                         |                                                     |                               |
| FIELD                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        | GROUP                 | SUB-GROUP                                | Family adaptation, Reenlistment, Leadership,<br>Family stressors, Community support, Army Personnel,<br>Social support, Family adaptive resources, Families (human) (CDS) |                                                     |                               |
| 19. ABSTRACT (Continue on reverse if necessary and identify by block number)<br>The Army Family Research Program (AFRP) is a 5-year integrated research program that<br>supports The Chief of Staff of the Army (CSA) White Paper on the Army Family and The Army<br>Family Action Plans (1984-1990) through the development of databases, models, program<br>evaluation technologies, and policy options that help the Army retain quality soldiers,<br>improve soldier and unit readiness, and increase family adaptation to Army life. This<br>report provides an overview and brief summary of the research on family strength that was<br>the basis for a conceptual model of family strength and adaptation in the Army. The report<br>presents a theoretical model and discusses key concepts in the areas of family stressors,<br>family adaptive resources, and family adaptation. <i>Keywords.</i> |                       |                                          |                                                                                                                                                                           |                                                     |                               |
| 20. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY OF ABSTRACT<br><input checked="" type="checkbox"/> UNCLASSIFIED/UNLIMITED <input type="checkbox"/> SAME AS RPT <input type="checkbox"/> DTIC USERS                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                             |                       |                                          | 21. ABSTRACT SECURITY CLASSIFICATION<br>Unclassified                                                                                                                      |                                                     |                               |
| 22a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE INDIVIDUAL<br>D. Bruce Bell                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                         |                       |                                          | 22b. TELEPHONE (Include Area Code)<br>(202) 274-8119                                                                                                                      |                                                     | 22c. OFFICE SYMBOL<br>PERI-RP |

# IDENTIFICATION OF STRONG/WELL FAMILIES AND THE MECHANISMS TO SUPPORT THEM

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## **IDENTIFICATION OF STRONG/WELL FAMILIES AND THE MECHANISMS TO SUPPORT THEM**

### **AN OVERVIEW AND SUMMARY**

The overall purpose of Task 1 is to identify the characteristics of strong/well families in the Army, to determine the advantages and contributions of family strength/wellness for the Army, and to identify the types of programs, services, and strategies at different levels of organizational responsibility for promoting the strength/wellness of Army families. The primary objective for Task 1 in the first project year is to develop, field test and refine a conceptual model of the antecedents and consequences of strong/well families in the Army, including the identification, definition, and measurement of its conceptual domains.

The conceptual model will provide the foundation and framework for the entire research program on Army family strength/wellness. The conceptual definitions and measures resulting from model development will be used for data collection and analysis in future project years to address key study questions.

The development and refinement of the model will be based upon a multimethod approach, including literature reviews, secondary analysis of available datasets, expert/user consultation, as well as field visits to conduct individual and focus-group interviews with Army families, leaders, and service providers. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview and summary of the results from the literature review. Based on these results, a preliminary conceptual model of family strength and adaptation in the Army is proposed as a vehicle for formulating and refining specific research questions which will guide both the secondary analysis as well as the field visits.

### **METHODOLOGY**

The task of developing and refining the proposed conceptual model from the literature review was divided into several distinct subtasks. First, a preliminary conceptual model was developed by the Principal Investigator to guide Task 1 activities (see Figure 1). This model was derived from a larger conceptual framework developed by the ARI

sponsored family retention panel of 1985, and was refined based on additional review of the military family literature.

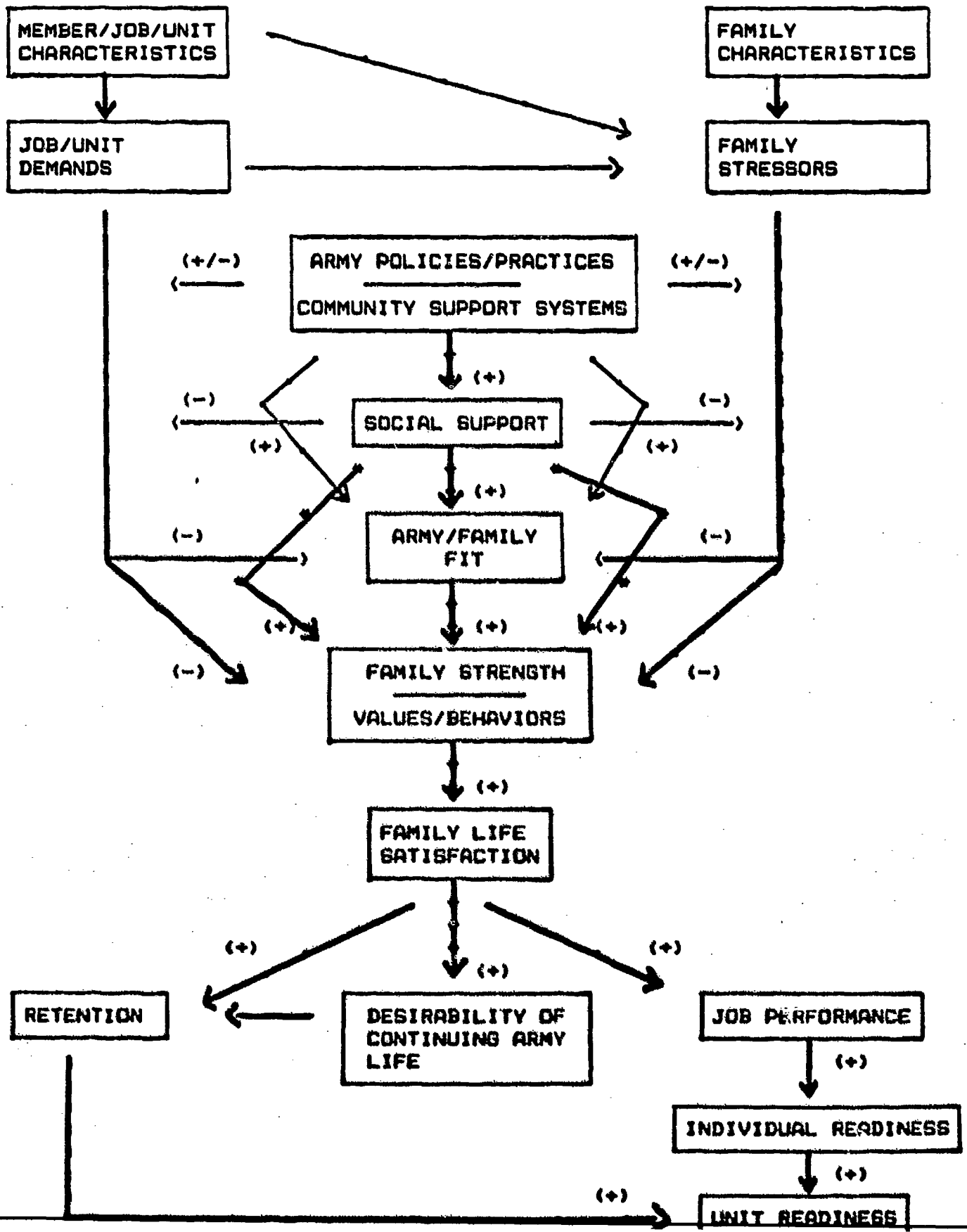
This early model not only specified the major conceptual domains included under Task 1, but also hypothesized the proposed linkages between these domains. In addition, both nominal and operational definitions were provided for each conceptual domain; a series of propositions were also proposed based upon prior research. Defined as a "theoretical strawman," the model was then presented both to the ARI Task 1 Scientist and to members of the Task 1 Project Team for critical review and comment. Based on subsequent revisions which reduced the scope of the model for structuring first year activities (see Figure 2), this model served as a vehicle for organizing and directing the literature review subtask.

Seven conceptual domains were specified in the abbreviated model: (a) member/job/unit characteristics, (b) family characteristics, (c) family stressors, (d) social support, (e) Army/family fit, (f) family strength, and (g) family life satisfaction. Individual team members agreed to accept responsibility for conducting a literature review in one or more of these seven domains.

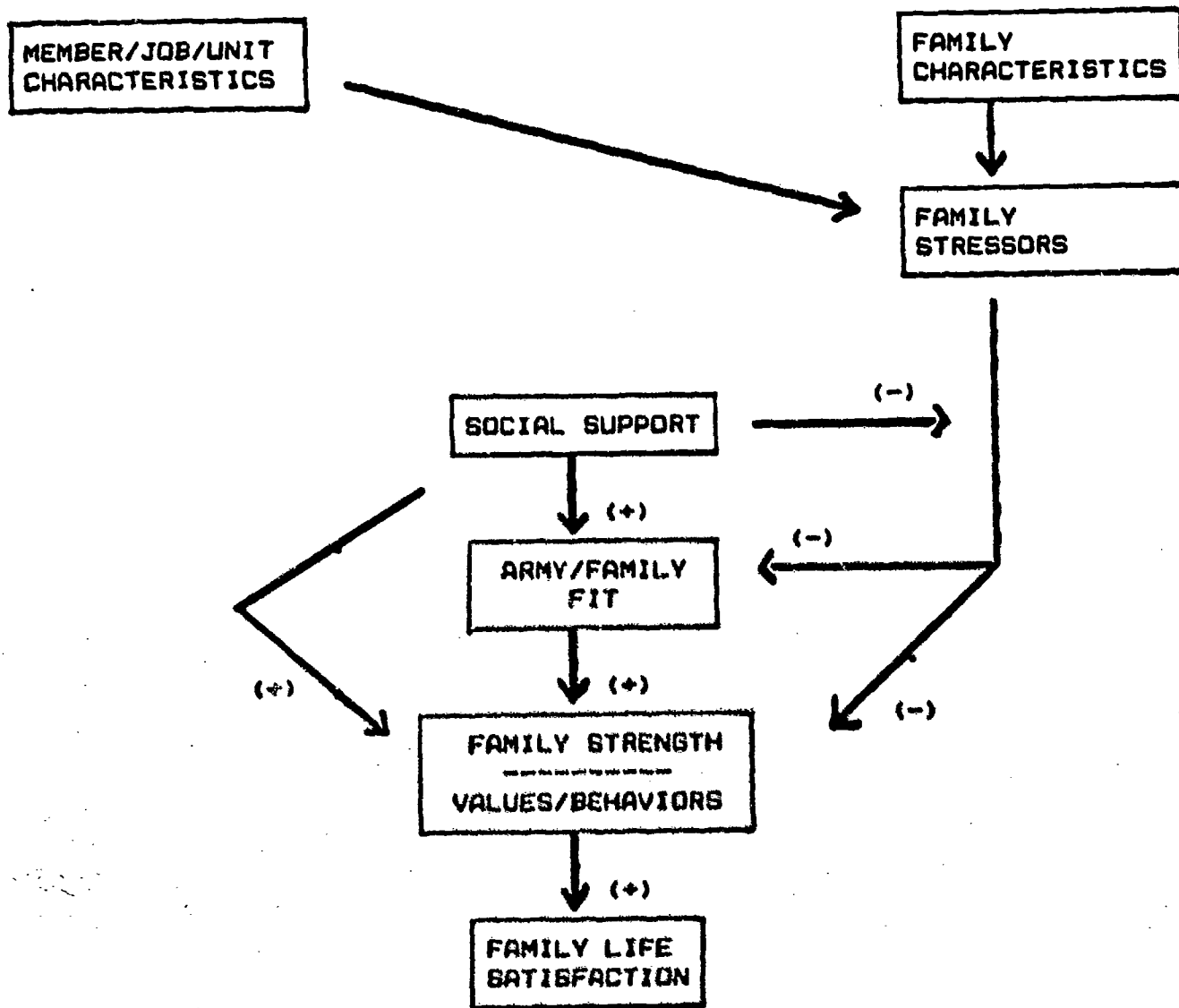
In conducting the literature review, team members were instructed to identify underlying indicators related to their assigned areas, particularly focusing on past definition and measurement of these indicators in the military and civilian literature. Based on this review, team members were instructed to propose nominal and operational definitions of for each of their assigned concepts, as well as to propose a measurement strategy for both qualitative and quantitative assessment. In addition to these responsibilities, based on their literature reviews, team members were asked to critically examine hypothesized linkages between their assigned conceptual domains and other conceptual domains in the model, as well as to recommend additional concepts for including in the model.

Based on these instructions, five summary papers were prepared by team members, each including an appendix with key reference documents. These summary papers were reviewed by the Principal Scientist, and suggestions were provided to the authors for revision. The revised papers were then distributed to the ARI Task 1 Scientist, the Task 1 Team Leader, the Principal Scientist and Deputy Project Manager for the over-all project, and to each member of the Task 1

FIGURE 1



**FIGURE 2**



research team.

To discuss these papers, a two-day forum was held at the Fairfax City Holiday Inn in late June 1987. Attendees included:

Sharon Ardison, ARI Staff (Day 1)  
Bruce Bell, ARI Task 1 Scientist  
Sharon Bishop, Caliber Task 1 Team Leader  
Gary Bowen, UNC-CH Task 1 Principal Investigator  
Jerry Croan, Caliber Deputy Project Manager (Day 2)  
Dennis Orthner, UGA Principal Scientist  
Judy DeJong, Caliber Team Member  
Cathy Stawarski, HumRRO Team Member  
Melanie Styles, HumRRO team member

The primary objective of this meeting was to discuss each of key concepts addressed by the Task 1 research, and to work toward conceptual clarity and model refinement.

The meeting was structured around each of the key endogenous concepts in the conceptual model: (a) family stressors, (b) social support, (c) Army/family fit, (d) family strength, and (e) family life satisfaction. Discussion focused on definition and measurement of each conceptual domain in the context of the respective literature review, as well on as the identification of conceptual gaps in the model. In the process of the two-day discussion, some concepts were realigned in the model, and additional operational indicators were proposed for purposes of conceptual measurement. Although the conceptual clarity and consensus sought by the meeting was not completely achieved, attendees were able to revise and simplify the conceptual model for guiding subsequent subtasks.

Based on the group feedback, responsible team members were asked to reconsider their nominal and operational definitions of their assigned concepts, and to suggest a strategy for quantitative measurement. They were also asked to develop a measurement protocol for field testing their concepts.

#### THE THEORETICAL MODEL

The SRA Model of Family Strength and Adaptation in the Army is a simplified version of the earlier conceptual model, building on the work of Hill (1949, 1958), McCubbin and Patterson (1982), Segal (1986), and Bowen (1987). An

abstract simplification of a complex set of interacting variables and processes, the model includes three major components: (a) family stressors, (b) family adaptive resources, and (c) family adaptation. A diagram of the model, including hypothesized relationships among model components is presented in Figure 3.

Grounded in both the theoretical and empirical literature (Bowl, 1987; Bronfenbrenner, 1976; Lavee, McCubbin, & Patterson, 1985), the following propositions are derived from the model: (a) the presence and pile-up of family stressors have a direct and negative effect on the level of family adaptation; (b) the nature and amount of family adaptive resources have a positive and mediating influence on the effect of family stressors on the level of family adaptation; (c) the nature and quality of family adaptive resources are both a source of support as well as a source of additional stressors, and may contribute to the presence, pile-up, and intensification of family stressors; (d) the nature and amount of family system resources directly and positively influences family adaptation; and (e) there is a direct and reciprocal interaction between family adaptation to marital and family life and family adaptation to Army life, and this is a positive relationship. Although an unspecified conceptual domain in the model, each of the major components in the model as well as the nature of their proposed relationships is hypothesized to vary by selective family and organizational characteristics and their interaction, including marital status, presence and ages of children in the family, length of marriage, post location, unit, and the MOS of the member.

In the section, each component of the conceptual model is briefly summarized and discussed based on the literature reviews as well as on the discussion and recommendations of the Task 1 Team. For purposes of the summary, reference citations are kept to a minimum.

Although continued refinement of these concepts will be accomplished through on-going literature reviews, expert and user consultation, secondary analysis of existing data sets, and field testing at selective Army posts, nominal and operational definitions of each component of the model are proposed as well as strategies for quantitative assessment.

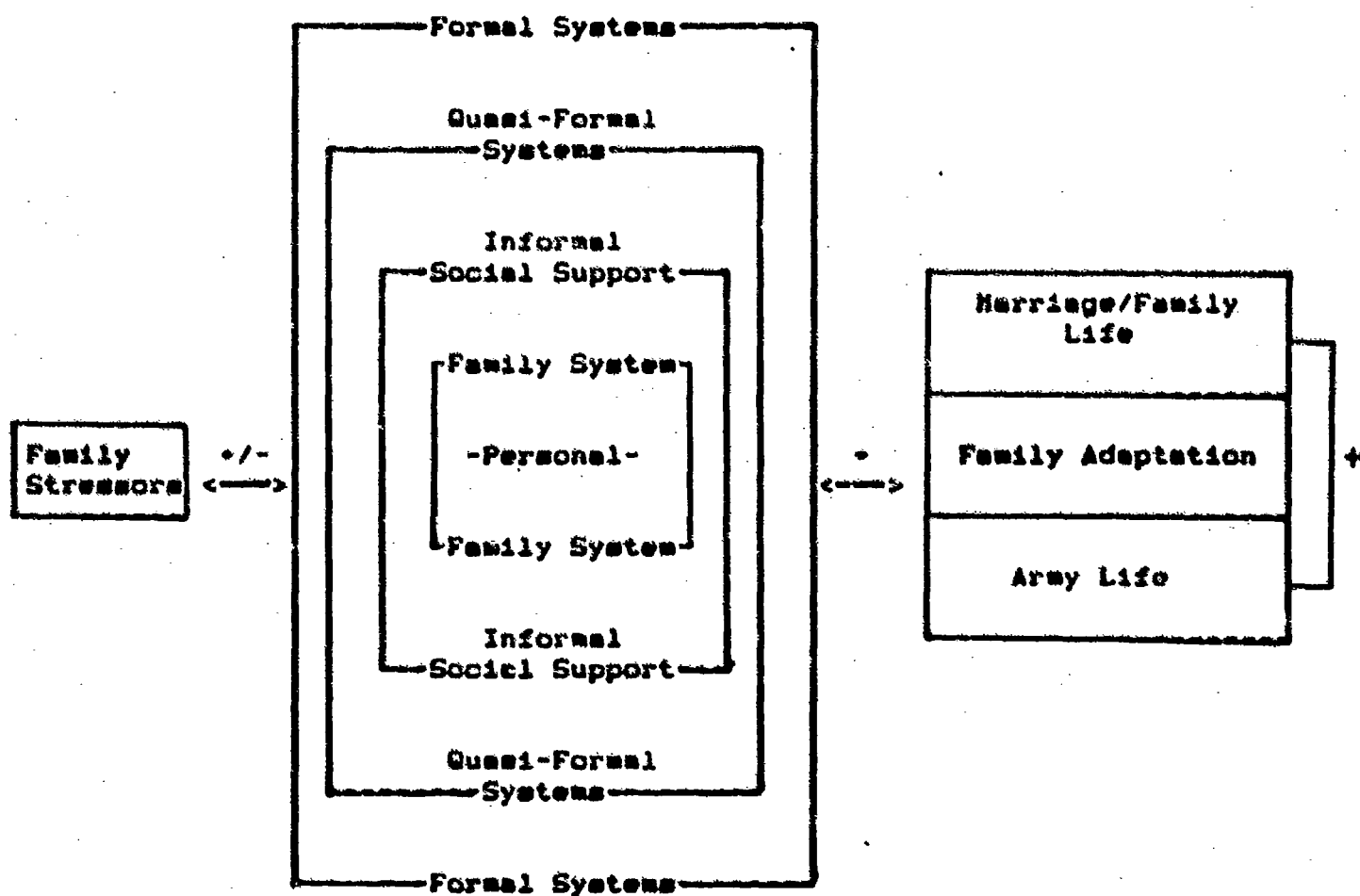
Figure 3

THE SRA MODEL OF FAMILY STRENGTH AND ADAPTATION  
IN THE US ARMY

FAMILY  
STRESSORS

FAMILY ADAPTIVE  
RESOURCES

FAMILY  
ADAPTATION



FAMILY  
STRESSORS

FAMILY ADAPTIVE  
RESOURCES

FAMILY  
ADAPTATION

## FAMILY STRESSORS

Consistent with the work of McCubbin and Patterson (1983), family stressors are defined as life events impacting upon the family system which have the potential to change the nature of family structure and interaction. The concept of family stressors is distinguished from the concept of stress; a family stressor does not necessarily result in individual or family stress--a physiological or psychological state which arises from an actual or perceived imbalance between the nature and level of family stressors and the resources that the individual or family has to meet accompanying demands for response and change.

Family stressors can enter a family system on a number of levels: on the individual level, on the relationship level between family members, or from the interactional level of family members with larger systems external to the family, including the work setting. However, individual stressors do not necessarily result in stressor events for the family.

A variety of typologies have been used to classify the numerous range of events that can effect the family system. A common classification system found in the literature distinguishes life events which are a more normative part of family development (e.g., parenthood) from those that are less normative (e.g., death of a child) or even catastrophic (e.g., a national disaster). Normative family stressors have three distinguishing characteristics: they occur in most families, they are usually expected, and they are most often short-term (McCubbin & Patterson, 1982). Other frequently used typologies classify family stressors based upon their effect on the family as well as upon the source of the stressor (e.g., internal; external).

Two variables related to the definition and measurement of the family stressors' concept were recommended for consideration in the Task 1 model: (a) the presence or absence of a range of family stressor events in the family system over a specified period of time, and (b) the level of perceived or actual stress on the family system resulting from the presence and pile-up of these events.

It is recommended that the measurement of the presence or absence of specified family stressors build upon the current version of FILE, the Family Inventory of Life Events and Changes (McCubbin & Patterson, 1987), including the addition of Army-specific stressors. Comprised of a wide

array of both normative and non-normative events, this scale is based upon the methodology used in the life events inventories whose prototype can be found in the SRRS, Social Readjustment Rating Scale (Holmes & Rahe, 1967). These inventories contain checklists of events which an individual uses to indicate which stressful events have happened to him or her in the recent past. A cumulative score is produced based on either an additive or weighted summary of the number of events which have occurred over the specified period of time.

It is recommended that the subscales and/or items selected and developed for the family stressors' scale be calibrated for families in different developmental stages through pilot studies. At the present time, FILE does not have established weighting norms for specific population groups. This would yield a valuable set of information about stressors and their severity for different types of families. It is also recommended that a 12-month time frame be used in assessing the presence or absence of specified family stressor events.

It is proposed that the second dimension of family stressor events, the amount of perceived or actual family stress generated by the event on the family system, be measured by asking respondents to indicate the level of stress resulting from each reported stressor event on a scale ranging from one to ten. Although a number of studies have attempted to assess the amount of stress associated with specific events, this approach has not been commonly used in studies examining a range of family stressor events, like the current version of FILE. Information from this subdimension of the measure would be the basis for weighting the effects of specified stressor events across different population groups.

## **FAMILY ADAPTIVE RESOURCES**

Not only does each family member bring a unique set of capabilities and assets to the family system, but also the family system itself develops and strengthens its own internal resources over time to meet as well as to resist the demands posed by stressor events. In addition, each family exists in a larger system of both informal and formal systems which has its own sources of demands on the family system as well as its own sources of support. Together, these resources and sources of support for meeting the demands and needs of family life constitute the family's adaptive resources--a term used by McCubbin and Patterson in the Double ABC-X Model (1982).

A multidimensional concept, family adaptive resources are conceptualized on five levels: (a) personal characteristics of individual family members, such as educational, financial, and psychological assets; (b) family system, such as communication, negotiation, and adaptability; (c) social support, such as kinship ties and friendships; (d) quasi-formal systems, such as work and neighborhood organizations; and (e) formal systems, such as military policies and practices. In some cases, the boundaries between these levels overlap. In addition, these levels of family adaptive resources are conceptualized as interdependent and complementary--a supply of capabilities at one level can offset the lack of capabilities at a second level.

At present, only two of these five levels of resources have been pursued by the Task 1 team in the literature reviews--family system and social support. A review of military policies and practices relevant to Task 1 activities is currently under review, and Orthner and Associates at the University of Georgia have agreed to review quasi-formal system resources for purposes of definition and measurement. Although the personal resources of family members are recognized in the literature as important assets to the family system in mitigating the effects of stressor events (Lavee, McCubbin, & Patterson, 1985), they are presently not under review by the Task 1 team.

### **Family System Resources**

The family is often regarded as the primary support system for itself, a place where members of the family provide both instrumental and emotional support to one

another. Although the concept of family system strengths has been discussed in the family literature since the 1930s', the formal study of "strengths" rather than "weaknesses and deficiencies" in families is relatively new. Consistent with the work of Hebert Otto, Nick Stinnett, and other pioneers in the study of family strength and related concepts (see Morgan, 1987 for a comprehensive review of this literature), family system resources are defined as those relationship patterns and attitudes among family members as well as those interpersonal skills and competencies of family members which enable the family system to deal effectively with the demands posed by family stressor events and which promote family adaptation to marital and family life as well as to life in the Army. Mace and Mace (1980) have referred to these patterns, skills and competencies as the family's "primary coping system."

The variable "family system resources" is operationally defined as a composite of affective involvement, role equity, family boundaries, religious orientation, feeling toward military service, community participation and support, and interpersonal skills and competencies.

**Affective Involvement.** The extent of emotional bonds between family members, including their level of interest in the welfare of one another and their willingness to invest themselves in the family.

**Role Equity:** The level of sharing of child-care and childrearing responsibilities as well as the degree to which family decisionmaking patterns value individual expression and input.

**Family Boundaries:** The degree to which family members prefer to handle personal problems inside the family as well as to make a good impression on others in the community.

**Religious Orientation:** The extent to which family members share the same religious beliefs, attend church or synagogue together, and pray together.

**Feelings Toward Military Service:** The level of commitment that family members feel toward the lifestyle and mission of the Army.

**Community Participation and Support:** The degree to which family members invest themselves in the community as well as their level of involvement with extended family, and their willingness to turn to relatives when personal or family problems arise.

**Interpersonal Skills and Competencies:** The extent to which family members are good listeners, perceived themselves as effective problem-solvers, compromise in resolving family problems, and are open to the views of others.

It is recommended that the measurement of these components of family system resources be based on the work of Boven & Janofsky (1987) in the U.S. Army who have developed valid and reliable scales for each component. Each Likert-type scale is comprised of between 3 and 17 items.

#### **Informal Social Support**

Including the network of friends, extended family members, neighbors, and other informal helpers to which the family is connected, sources of informal social support are recognized as important family resources for dealing effectively with the demands associated with family stressor events as well as for promoting positive family adaptation. Although much attention has been focused on the concept of informal social support, there is little consistency across studies in defining, operationalizing, and measuring underlying variable dimensions.

According to Lin (1986), the concept of social support has two components: social and support. The social component of social support reflects the family's tie to the social environment at three levels. (a) the community level, (b) the level of social networks, and (c) the level of intimate and confiding relationships. These levels are distinguished largely on the basis of the degree of formality which characterizes the relationship.

The family's sense of belonging to the community, representing its first tie to the social environment, includes the participation of family members in voluntary organizations and their level of identity with the community, or "sense of community." Representing the social integration of the family into the larger community (Lin, 1986), relationships at this level are generally characterized by a mixture of formal and informal linkages and responsibilities.

Social networks, the family's second tie to the social environment, include those persons with whom family members maintain both direct and indirect contact, such as extended family, co-workers, friends, and neighbors. Each member of a family, including children, has a personal network and collectively these networks comprise the family's social network (Unger & Powell, 1980).

Before discussing the third level of the family's tie to the social environment, it is important to distinguish between social support systems and social networks. A social network refers to all the people with whom family members maintain contact and from whom they potentially receive support (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1987). On the other hand, a social support system is that subset of persons within a family's total social network upon whom they rely on for aid in times of need (Thoits, 1982). As a consequence, not all members of a social network necessarily provide social support.

The innermost level of the social environment consists of confiding relationships, including intimate relationships with relatives and friends (Lin, 1986). Mutual and reciprocal exchanges are expected in these relationships which are characterized by a high level of trust and interdependency. Based on the work of Lin (1986), it is this third level that has the greatest impact on a family's sense of well-being.

The "support" component of social supports reflects the type of support provided to the family. Although many types of support have been identified in the literature, two forms of support are most often distinguished--instrumental and expressive. Based on the work of Cobb (1976; 1979), instrumental support refers to the use of a relationship to achieve a goal or receive a service, while expressive support refers to emotional support. The provision of instrumental and expressive support to the family by members of the family's social environment can result in the family feeling loved and cared for, esteemed and valued, and a sense of belonging (Cobb, 1976).

For purposes of this research, social support is nominally defined as the perceived or actual instrumental and/or expressive aid available and/or provided to the family by members of the community, by the family's social network, and by confiding relationships maintained by family members--

the family's social environment. Instrumental support is defined to refer to the use of a relationship to achieve a goal or to receive a service, while expressive support is used to synonymously mean emotional support (Lin, 1986).

The variable social support is operationally defined as a composite of the composition and size of a family's social environment, as well as the extent to which the family perceives the social environment as supportive and available for mobilization. Reflecting the multidimensionality of the social support concept, nine subdimensions of social support are specified for operational definition and measurement:

**Content of support.** The type of support provided by members of the family's social environment: instrumental or expressive.

**Context.** The type of support that is offered by members of the family's social environment in response to particular situations and events.

**Support network.** All of the people with whom family members maintain contact and from whom they potentially receive support.

**Social support system.** The subset of persons in the family's social environment upon which the family primarily relies on for help.

**Proximity of support.** The physical and psychological closeness of family members to members of their social environment.

**Perceived availability of support.** The perceptions by family members of how quickly members of their social environment could be mobilized for support.

**Evaluation of support.** The extent to which family members are satisfied with the quantity and quality of support provided by members of their social environment.

**Willingness of family members to seek support.** The likelihood of family members to turn to members of their social environment in times of personal and family need.

**Provision of support.** The frequency of providing help as well as the feelings of obligation to provide help by family members to members of their social environment.

It is recommended that the measurement of these nine subdimensions of informal social support be based on a review and revision of existing measures in the literature, including the development of new scales and items if warranted. These measures include the Perceived Support Network Inventory (PSNE) by Oritt, Paul and Behrman (1985), the Social Support Questionnaire (SNI) by Norbeck (1980), the Community Participation Scale (CPS) by Lin, Dumin and Woelfel (1986), and the Efficacy for Seeking Support Scale by Eckenrode (1983).

## **FAMILY ADAPTATION**

The outcome dimension in the model, family adaptation is defined as a composite of family members' overall adjustment to marital and family life as well as to Army life. Directly impacted upon by the ratio of family stressors to family adaptive resources, it is viewed as a continuous variable which ranges from high to low. Based on the work of Levee, McCubbin and Patterson (1985), it is predicted that family adaptation is facilitated when the demands on the family unit are balanced by its available resources. From the model, it is also predicted that there is a reciprocal relationship between adaptation to marital and family life and adaptation to life in the Army, and this is a positive relationship.

### **Family Adaptation to Marital and Family Life**

The study of the quality of family relationships has a history dating back to Hamilton's (1929) classic study of marital adjustment. Since that time, numerous attempts have been made to conceptualize and assess the nature of family relationships, especially the marital union. A variety of terms have been promulgated in the process, the most common being "family life satisfaction," "family functioning," "family environment," "satisfaction with the family system," as well as a number of concepts proposed to reflect the quality of the marital relationship (e.g., marital satisfaction, marital adjustment, marital happiness, marital stability) and the quality of parent-child interaction (e.g., parent-child relationship satisfaction). While these

concepts all represent qualitative dimensions and evaluations of relationships within the family, there is a great deal of ambiguity and overlap in the way these concepts are defined, as well as in the scales designed to measure them.

For purposes of this study, family adaptation to marital and family life is defined as the relative balance of commitment, satisfactions, and tensions within the family system. It is operationalized broadly as a composite of family life satisfaction, marital stability, and family distress. The first component, family life satisfaction, is comprised of four subdimensions: (a) overall satisfaction with marital and family relationships, including members of the extended family; (b) satisfaction with patterns of marital and family interaction, including communication, companionship, and intimacy; (c) overall comparative satisfaction with marital and family relationships compared to other couples and, if applicable, other parents; and (d) the degree to which family members perceive that they would be more satisfied with their marital and family relationships if they would leave the Army for the civilian sector.

The second subdimension of family adaptation to marital and family life, marital stability, is also comprised of four subdimensions: (a) the level of commitment that the husband and wife feel toward the marital relationship, (b) the degree to which each spouse will do their best to make the relationship work, (c) the frequency that the husband and wife considers marital separation and divorce, and (d) whether the couple has experienced an actual marital separation due to marital difficulties in the past 12 months.

The last subdimension, family distress, is a series of overall indicators which reflect the degree to which family members feel an sense of pessimism toward the family system (e.g., something is always going wrong in our family) as well as an on-going level of tension and difficulty in the family system itself (e.g., we are constantly arguing with one another).

Measures of these three components of family adaptation to marital and family life are currently under development. A number of existing scales will be consulted in the actual development of items and scales, including the Dyadic Adjustment Scale by Spanier (1976), the Family Environment Scale by Moos and Moos (1981), as well as indicators used in recent surveys by Orthner and Boven (1982) and by Boven and

Janofsky (1987).

### **Family Adaptation to Army Life**

The viability of the family system is dependent upon its fit with other systems in its social environment with which it interfaces. For the Army family, the military system is a major, if not, the major system in its environment. Family adaptation to Army life is a concept which describes the health of this interface, and refers to the family's attitude toward life in the Army as well as to the commitment of family members to the Army.

Past studies exploring the level of family adaptation to military life have considered a number of aspects of the military/family interface, including the goodness of the military/family fit, the level of accommodations between the military and family in supporting one another's objectives, and the attitude of the family toward the military system (McCubbin, Patterson & Lavee, 1983; Szoc, 1982).

Based on the review of this literature, the level of family adaptation to Army life is operationally defined as a composite of family members' general attitude toward the Army, their satisfaction with Army provisions for the family, their commitment to continuing the Army career, and their level of support of the Army mission. It is recommended that the quantitative measurement of these four variables be based on a review and revision of existing measures, including those used by Szoc (1982) in his study of family factors related to retention in the Navy, McCubbin and Patterson's (1982) Index of Family Coherence (1982), Boven and Janofsky's (1987) profile of Family Strength and Adaptation to Family Life, as well as selected items used on the 1985 DoD Survey of Enlisted and Officer Personnel.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The literature review provides an important theoretical and empirical foundation for the Task 1 effort. A conceptual model, soundly grounded in the theoretical and empirical research, identifies the critical concepts as well as the chain of linkages between concepts necessary to understand the nature and dynamics of family strength and adaptation in the Army.

It is vital that the model continue to be tested and refined through secondary analysis of available datasets,

expert and user interviews, field testing, as well as through on-going literature review. If the model is to provide future assistance in making policy, program, and budgetary decisions, it must be properly specified, adequately reflecting the reality of the situation for servicemembers and their families.

Given the timeline for the first-wave longitudinal survey, it is critical that work progress in translating the theoretical model into an empirically testable one. This involves not only specifying the indicators predicted to define each latent construct in the model, but also developing valid and reliable measures of each specific indicator. It is recommended that a small team of Task 1 scientists and Task 5 scientists meet in early September, after the two planned field visits, to review the model as proposed, including a review and discussion of both measurement issues as well as the development of valid and reliable operational measures.

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