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Domestic Violence in the Military Context: The Communication of Contributing Factors by Military Wives, Friends, and Family

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DOMESTIC VIOLENCE IN THE MILITARY CONTEXT: THE
COMMUNICATION OF CONTRIBUTING FACTORS BY
MILITARY WIVES, FRIENDS AND FAMILY

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Abstract

The present research establishes what military wives, family, and friends believe are factors contributing to domestic violence in the military context. The data set consists of thirty previously conducted interviews. Attribution theories of blame and responsibility are applied to the uncovered themes and results suggest that blame and responsibility for domestic abuse in the military context is attributed by wives, friends, and family to the military as an organization rather than to the abuser.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

On June 11th, 2002, Rigoberto Nieves shot both himself and his wife, Teresa, just two days after returning home from Afghanistan. On June 29th, 2002, William Wright strangled his wife, Jennifer. On July 9th, 2002, Cedric Griffin stabbed his wife, Marilyn, fifty times before setting her on fire. Finally, on July 19th, 2002, Brandon Floyd shot his wife, Andrea, and then shot himself. That’s six weeks-four murders-and one military base at Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

Questions have increasingly been raised concerning the nature of domestic violence, as it occurs in the context and community of military bases nation wide. Those murders at Ft. Bragg have not only captured the attention of the media, but have exposed a variety of voices. The issue has become extremely controversial, then, as the government voice maintains one position and those living in the (military) communities maintain another. Specifically, the military has attributed the domestic violence to marital problems while several military wives have attributed the problem to a lack of decompression as soldiers return home from combat.

The present research reviews attribution theories of blame and responsibility, the issue of domestic abuse, and the issue of domestic abuse as it applies to the military context and community in these domestic violence cases. The purpose of this study is to describe what military wives and their families and friends perceive are factors contributing to instances of domestic violence in the military context. Furthermore, the present research seeks to explore how the language used to express those factors will inherently attribute blame and responsibility.

The data for the study is a set of previously conducted interviews with military
wives, their friends, and their family. The interviews were searched for thematic issues contributing to domestic violence in the military context. In order to provide a different perspective, statements made by the government and military were also examined.

**Literature Review**

The purpose of this literature review is to provide a communicative framework for interpreting the stories of abused women in the military context (as told in previously conducted interviews). Specifically, attribution theory is examined to enable the researcher to uncover the internal meaning making inherent in the stories. Also, previous literature on the analysis of talk, using the work of Duck (1994), is presented to frame the analysis of the told stories. Finally, literature on domestic abuse is briefly reviewed, as a way to show how abuse in the military context may be unique.

**Attribution Theory**

As the purpose of this research is to explore the alleged motivations of domestic abuse in the military context, whether those motivations are internal or external in nature, attribution theory is applicable. In the earliest development of attribution theory, it was posited that “good” acts would most often be attributed to “good” people, while “bad” acts would most often be attributed to “bad” people (Weiner, 1990). Perhaps in the case of the present research, then, it may be difficult for some to rationally attribute the “bad” act of domestic abuse to those “good” and upstanding soldiers that serve our country.

There are several variants of attribution theory. When investigating attributions of success and achievement, for example, the level of expectancy has been examined. Accordingly, if a person sets a goal that he or she expects to reach, he or she will likely work harder to achieve that goal (Weiner, 1990). Further, the “determinants of success”
are attributed to internal and external factors. Then, according to those determinants, the construction of the world might be accredited to either internal factors that may include skills and/or ability, or external factors that may include chance and level of task difficulty (Weiner, 1990).

Weiner (1990) contends that factors other than internal and external-ness must be considered when contemplating how attributions are made. He posits that a dimension of controllability, or the level of control that one person has over those internal and external elements, will contribute to successes and failures. In addition, Weiner (1990) identifies emotions that may be linked with either a positive or negative outcome. He maintains that linking affect to a variety of causal dimensions has allowed for the application of attribution theory to situations that may very well lead to the prediction of marital failure versus marital success; “For example, one could examine if distressed partners in marriage perceive causes of negative events as stable, so that perceived expectancy of future success of the marriage is low, or if attributions were being made for negative events to controllable causes, hence increasing anger” (p.10). Or, “One also could examine if the cause of a need was ascribed to uncontrollable causes, thus evoking pity and help, or to controllable causes, thereby giving rise to anger and neglect” (Weiner 1990, p. 11).

In an attempt to link concepts of conflict (in close relationships) and attribution, Fincham, Bradbury, and Grych (1990) investigated a model including three types of attribution, two of which are related to the research at hand. Those three types of attribution are 1) causality, 2) responsibility, and 3) blame. Since causality cannot be established from the data used in this study (i.e. previously conducted interviews) only
the factors of responsibility and blame will be reviewed in any detail.

Responsibility and Attribution

Responsibility attribution includes three dimensions, according to Fincham, Bradbury, and Grych (1990). In order to be held responsible for his/her behavior, a person must have “(a) an appreciation of the inappropriateness or wrongfulness of the behavior, (b) knowledge of an alternative conflict-avoidant behavior, and (c) the ability to carry out this alternative action” (Fincham et al., 1990, p. 169-170). An example provided by Fincham et al. (1990) is that of a husband who may fail to discuss his feelings with his wife. Fincham, Bradbury, and Grych (1990) say “he may not be held responsible if he is seen by the wife to lack the skills necessary to communicate about feelings” (p. 169).

Fincham, Bradbury and Grych (1990) also examine how issues of control and a lack of intent figure into the responsibility attribution equation; the researchers say, “when a partner can potentially control behavior that violates a standard, he or she will be held accountable for that behavior” (p. 171). If one’s behavior is perceived as unintentional, then, responsibility will not be attributed to that person. It should be noted that in connection with the research at hand, violence is often considered an intentional act. According to Straus and Gelles (1986), “violence is defined as an act carried out with the intention, or perceived intention, of causing physical pain or injury” (p. 467).

According to Shaver (1985) there are five levels or stages of personal responsibility. The first level may be described as association. For the present research, this means that though all soldiers are not abusive in the military context, they may still be associated with abuse by virtue of being in the military. A second level of personal responsibility is causality. Shaver (1985) says that “At this level anything caused by a
person is ascribed to him or her” (p. 88). Causality will point to a person who will take responsibility for the situation at hand. A third level of responsibility is foreseeability. Foreseeability, according to Shaver (1985) is a notion that describes an ability of the person at fault to be able to see the outcome of his or her actions. Next is intentionality or the “evidence that the actor was trying to bring about the event” (p. 89). Finally, Shaver (1985) discusses justifiability. Justifiability allows for an intentional action to be excused, at least in part.

Shaver (1983) also posits that there are three stages of the attribution process. Stage one includes an observation of the action. Shaver (1983) says “When the stimulus is another person, the perceiver may observe that actor in person, may view a representation such as film or videotape of the action, or may be informed in some less direct manner (in writing, through the account of a first-hand observer, through hearsay) that the behavior in question has taken place” (p. 27). The current examines accounts of observations of abuse through interviews conducted with women who have either experienced the phenomenon or know someone who has. Additionally, interviews conducted with the friends and family of those victims will be discussed because many of the victims themselves have been killed as a result of the domestic abuse they have suffered. The second stage of the attribution process, according to Shaver (1983) includes a judgment of the intention of the actor. The third stage occurs when the dispositional attribution is made. This dispositional attribution attempts to answer “why” an event occurred.

Finally, Shaver (1985) has reviewed dimensions of responsibility and attribution, some of which have been previously discussed by the earliest literature. First
there is a causal dimension that covers how directly one person may be held responsible. In other words, may one person be attributed with an act, or should that attribution cover a more general spectrum of cause? Second is a dimension of knowledge, “representing the degree to which the stimulus person was seen as aware (versus unaware) of the consequences of the action taken” (p. 101). Next is intentionality, or “a measure of the degree to which the action will be thought intentional, versus involuntary” (p. 101).

Fourth is a dimension of coercion, a dimension that may likely be applied to the present research. Coercion will “measure the degree to which responsibility for an intentional action can be mitigated by the presumed presence of strong forces within the environment” (p. 102). Last is the appreciation of the moral wrongfulness of one’s conduct, that is, taking responsibility for one’s own actions and understanding the inappropriateness of those actions additionally.

The present study utilizes this literature to explain with whom military wives, friends, and family have attributed responsibility for instances of domestic violence in the military context. Issues concerning control, intentionality, and justification, specifically, are addressed.

Blame and Attribution

Another type of attribution focuses upon blame. Fincham, Bradbury, and Grych (1990) say that although one may be responsible for his or her actions, he or she may not necessarily be to blame for those actions. Shaver (1985) notes, “An assignment of blame is, therefore, a particular sort of social explanation. It is the outcome of a process that begins with an event having negative consequences, involves judgments about causality, personal responsibility, and possible mitigation” (p. 4). Fincham, Bradbury, and Grych
(1990) found that “persons in close relationships readily assign blame in the absence of an account from the partner and hold such judgments with considerable certainty” (p. 171). Shaver (1985) suggests that those values of the surrounding context or culture undoubtedly effect how blame is placed—an interesting consideration when discussing a culture/context such as the military.

The current research examines attributions of responsibility and blame as they surface in the interviews conducted with victims of domestic abuse in the military context.

Analyzing Talk

To be able to grasp the deeper meanings inherent in the abused women’s stories, it is useful to consider how Duck (1994) talks about “talk.” Gubrium and Holstein (1994) say, “talk and interaction not only make visible the unseen personal realms of experience, but also embody social realms such as the family, home, and community” (173). Duck (1994) agrees that talk and interaction “make visible the unseen” and notes that “pregnant pauses, significant omissions, or the un-spoken” will additionally reveal a great deal about the speaker (10). In other words, it’s not just what the speaker says concerning attributions of responsibility and blame, but how he/she says it. Duck (1994) says that “Any meaning of a word inevitably implies more than it says directly, and it does this because the speaker or the listener knows more than is said in any given word that a speaker chooses” (17).

In opposition to silence, Duck (1994) maintains that talk will allow the speaker to disclose attitudes, beliefs, and information while also expressing emotion and revealing thought. According to Duck (1994), language illustrates “the way the speaker
construes and understands the world “ (12). He goes on to say “As persons relate, they
display themselves and their views of the world in their talk, both in context and style,
both in what the talk says and what it does not, both directly and indirectly” (11).

The present research analyzes emerging themes in accounts of military
domestic violence and de-constructs the language with which participants expressed
those themes. The language used by participants reveals a great deal about where issues
surrounding blame and responsibility are attributed. As Duck notes, what people say
implies relationship definition, social appropriateness, “and a host of other social,
cultural, organizational, dyadic, and personal paraphernalia” beyond their words (18).
Duck (1994) calls this implication “associative inference” and maintains that the
inference relies on three objectives. First, implications rely on the fact that “the human
mind readily moves from one realm of meaning to another and constructs connections”
(18). Second, “human thinking also restlessly and continually moves from a present
‘place’ to another one-you cannot not imply” (18). Finally, “associative inference” will
depend on the notion that “humans often hold two realms of discourse in mind at once
and make higher order comparisons between them” (18). With every statement made by
participants, then, there will be a complicated variance of meanings to be drawn from the
talk.

Beyond the purpose of relaying a message, talk surfaces at strategic, individual,
and relational levels. Strategic talk may include “the denial of other counter positions;
self-presentation; impression management” while individual talk includes “enacting,
expressing, or making real an individual’s particular goals in interaction; acknowledging
others’ beliefs and values” (Duck 1994, 14). Relational talk includes “allowing
discussion about similarities; purveying disagreement; indicating affection; making relational propositions” (14). Talk thought to maintain the relationship is a part of our everyday lives and everyday talk, according to Duck (1994). A partner’s talk will likely depict the partner’s “experience of being themselves and of being in the relationship” (143), covering issues that may be concerned with relationship power, attachment, and disengagement.

Domestic Abuse

To understand how abuse has been studied in the past, this section will review literature on definitions of abuse, predictors of abuse, causes of abuse, characteristics of abusers, and theories of abuse. Following this review, specific research on abuse in the military context is examined as it relates to the current study.

Defining Abuse

According to Jenkins and Parmer Davidson (2001), it wasn’t until the late 19th century that domestic abuse was considered to be morally erroneous. At this time, twelve states considered (while three states adopted) a position in favor of anti-wife beating laws. Maryland, Delaware, and Oregon specifically, considered wife beating an offense worthy of the whipping post (Kakar, 1998). Until that time, domestic abuse was considered by society a widely accepted behavior, as many expected the woman to be subservient to the man (Jenkins & Davidson, 2001). Jenkins and Davidson (2001) note that although significant legal and social change has taken place in the time since 1970, there are still examples of domestic abuse that support archaic beliefs, “place blame on the victim, excuse or justify the abuser’s actions, or promote nonintervention on the grounds of family privacy can be found in court findings, law enforcement responses,
medical and mental health professionals’ records, religious edicts, or reactions of friends, neighbors, and family of abused women” (p. 43). Further, the National Crime Victimization Survey found in 1992 that women are six times more likely than men to experience intimate partner/domestic abuse; in fact, “violence at the hand of an intimate involved about 93 women per 1,000 in 1992-1993” (as cited by Hampton et al. 1999, p. 44).

There are many interpretations of what constitutes physical and verbal abuse. For example Straus and Gelles (1990) define physical violence as an act intended to cause physical pain, while Sugarman and Hotaling (1989) consider abuse to be even the threat of violence. Physical violence is defined by Suman Kakar (1998) as taking “minor acts like pushing, shoving, pinching, grabbing, throwing dishes or slapping on the face or arm” (p. 46). More severe acts may include blows, choking, burning, violence with objects, and violence with weapons (Kakar, 1998). Cahn (1996) defines domestic violence as “the ability to impose one’s will (i.e., wants, needs, or desires) on another person through the use of verbal or nonverbal acts, or both, done in a way that violates socially acceptable standards and carried out with the intention or the perceived intention of inflicting physical pain or psychological pain, injury, suffering, or both” (p. 18). This particular study will define domestic abuse according to those perceptions and definitions described by previously interviewed military wives.

Where communication and domestic violence are concerned, Cahn (1996) describes three communicative dimensions that may be linked to the issues of violence:

The instrumental dimension reflects the degree to which physical and sexual aggression is self-reinforcing because it is often an effective way for abusers to get what they want. The relationship dimension indicates the degree to which
abusers are willing to sacrifice enduring, supportive, and loving relationships to get what they want. The identity dimension involves the abusers’ egos and their attempts to offer accounts to justify their actions and repair their identities (p. 18).

According to Cahn (1996), it is important to consider each of these three dimensions when studying domestic violence. Additionally, it is important to consider channels of communication, social contexts, and those meanings that members attribute to one another’s messages (Cahn, 1996).

The frequency of violence is also a relevant factor in its definition. Rand and Saltzman (2001) say that literature on violence against women reflects a notion that wife beating is a series of interconnected occurrences rather than one single event. In fact, the National Violence Against Women Survey found that "two-thirds of women physically assaulted by an intimate partner had been victimized multiple times by that partner" (as cited by Rand & Saltzman, 2001, p. 137). The Rand and Saltzman (2001) study reveals that women "reported that the same thing happened each time in all incidents by the same offender" (p 145). Women have reported, that instances of abuse will likely reoccur, but what the “same thing” being reported with each incident of abuse means may be questionable. Rand and Saltzman (2001) admit that "different respondents may interpret this concept of sameness in different ways, for example, did the offender do the same thing each time, was the outcome the same each time or even, were the circumstances the same each time" (p. 145).

**Predicting Abuse**

In their study of a Navy recruit sample, White, Merrill, and Koss (2001) found that verbal aggression is the single best predictor of aggression, while physical aggression
is the second best predictor. White et al. (2001) considers both verbal and physical aggression *situational* variables. Other situational variables will include communication patterns, stress, alcohol use, and the like (White et al., 2001). White et al. maintains, “situational factors increase the likelihood of conflict in relationships” (p. 912). Interestingly, situational factors may additionally include “features of the specific situation in which the violence occurs” (p. 912). Background variables, as opposed to situational variables include the observation of interparental physical aggression, and early childhood experiences (White et al., 2001). As military wives won’t likely describe background variables, the research at hand focuses upon those communicative, relational, and situational variables involved.

Domestic abuse has been attributed to many factors. These include biological factors such as androgenic hormonal influences; evolutionary theories; intrapsychic explanations focused on mental disorder or personality traits and profiles; social learning models that highlight the socialization experiences that shape individual men to be violent; social information possessing theory concerning the cognitive processes that offenders engage in before, during and after violence; sociocultural analysis aimed at understanding the structural features of society at the level of the dyad, family, peer group, school, religion, media, and state that encourage male violence and maintain women as a vulnerable class of potential victims; and feminist explanations stressing the gendered nature of violence against women and its roots in patriarchal social systems” (p. 50). Eigenberg (2001) says that stress may contribute to a man’s tendency to be violent, although research cannot explain why all men who experience stress do not resort to violence.
Causes of Abuse and Characteristics of the Abuser

Eigenberg (2001) addresses and describes those causal theories of society and culture, the family, and the individual. She claims that theories of society and culture attribute the problem of domestic violence to social structures and cultural norms, while family theories attribute violence to “the structure of the family, the interpersonal interactions of families, and the social isolation of families” (Eigenberg 2001, p. 162). She also says that theories with an emphasis on the individual will attribute domestic violence to personality disorders, social learning, and the like (Eigenberg, 2001).

Hampton, Vandergriff-Avery and Kim (1999) also note that there are some general characteristics that have been reportedly typical of abusers in the past. For example, men who abuse may likely be more hostile, controlling, jealous, and sexually aggressive than those who do not abuse (Hampton et al., 1999). Similarly, Dixon and Browne (2003) compiled a list of those characteristics that researchers have associated with domestic violent men, including low assertiveness, low self-esteem, poor social skills, alcohol and drug misuse, poor impulse control, cognitive distortions, inappropriate dependencies, violent backgrounds, a history of violent behavior, and antisocial personality. Torres and Han (2003) found, however, that although many researchers attribute some level of violence to alcohol, their study failed to prove a significant association between the two variables.

Dixon and Browne (2003) say that spouse abusers are not a homogeneous group, and consider three types of abusers. A "family only" abuser may be characterized by a low frequency of violence, a low severity of violence, and familial abuse, whereas a "generally violent/antisocial" abuser may be characterized by moderate to severe levels of
violence, psychological/sexual/nonsexual violence, extrafamilial violence, and perhaps substance abuse (Dixon & Browne, 2003). Finally, a "dysphonic/borderline personality" abuser may be characterized by psychological distress, moderate to severe levels of violence, and evidence of borderline personality (Dixon & Browne, 2003). Dixon and Browne (2003) believe these distinctions are important as, "no one treatment may be universally applicable to all types of domestic offenders" (p 126). Torres and Han (2003) say "while there are a number of factors that have been identified as correlates of domestic violence, the existing literature does not provide any conclusive support at this time" (p. 669). Torres and Han (2003) suggest, however, that specific ages, education levels, and/or income levels may be linked to abusive behavior. Additionally, Torres and Han (2003) say that a level of physical abuse may be associated with whether the offender has been violent outside of the family unit, or not.

*Theories of Abuse*

A number of theoretical explanations of abuse have been presented in the domestic violence literature. For example, some have explored a feminist model of violence. Eigenberg (2001) says, “According to this view, domestic violence in intimate relationships mirrors the patriarchal organization of society in which men play a dominant role in most social situations” (p. 164). The feminist model may fall under the causal theories of society and culture. According to Hampton, Vandergriff-Avery and Kim (1999), social and cultural theories of domestic abuse include the notion of social learning. Hampton et al. (1999) says, “In relation to marital violence, social learning theory predicts that someone who has witnessed or experienced a great deal of violence will model that type of behavior him- or herself” (p. 49). Members of the military are
likely to be subjected to a relatively gruesome display of violence in comparison to the general population. Eigenberg (2001) says in sum that domestic violence is a complicated issue that must explore not only the individual characteristics of the man and woman involved, but also structure of the relationship, and the role of society in that structure.

Jenkins and Davidson (2001) contend that an integration of theories allows researchers to best explore the issue of domestic abuse. They note that “these discourses are pathology, violence as an expression of inner tension, violence as an instrumental power strategy, wife abuse as a consequence of the normative social system, and violence as learned behavior” (p. 44). Those fourth and fifth dimensions or discourses attribute violent behavior to either the norms and practices of socialization processes or violent behavior that is learned and experienced.

Jenkins and Davidson (2001) acknowledged trends in the most recent theory on domestic abuse. They note, for example, the research of Heise (1998), who identifies personal history, the microsystem, the exosystem, and the macrosystem as factors that contribute to domestic violence. Jenkins and Davidson (2001) say that “The system of personal history includes such factors as witnessing marital violence as a child, being abused as a child, or having an absent or rejecting father,” while “The microsystem includes such factors as male dominance in the family, male control of wealth in the family, use of alcohol, and marital/verbal conflict” (pg. 49). Additionally, “the exosystem includes low socioeconomic status/unemployment, isolation of woman and family, and delinquent peer associations” (pg. 49). And finally, a macrosystem will include “masculinity linked to aggression and dominance, rigid gender roles, and acceptance of interpersonal violence” (Jenkins & Davidson, 2001, p. 50). Thus, to understand the
response to domestic violence by its victims, the social context of the environment needs to be examined.

The Military Context and Domestic Abuse

The current study not only considers those issues associated with domestic abuse at large, but focuses more specifically on military contexts and communities. Merrill, Hervig, Milner, Newell, and Koss (2001) say “a problem with studying violence in existing military families is that, if higher rates are found, it is not known if the rates are higher because the individuals entering military service have higher preliminary rates of intimate partner violence, if service-related conditions (e.g., stress) increase the rates of intimate partner violence, or if both factors contribute” (p. 2). The present study describes and explores issues associated with domestic violence in the military context, as identified by the wives of military men and their friends and family.

In their study of 2,987 male and female Navy basic trainees, for instance, Merrill et al. (2001) found that 50% of those trainees “reported receiving, inflicting, or receiving and inflicting intimate partner physical violence” (p. 9). Surprisingly, 43.3% of men as compared to 40.3% of women reported having been the recipient of at least one instance of intimate partner physical violence (Merrill et al., 2001). Similarly, 46.9% of women reported inflicting physical violence on an intimate partner as compared to 31.9% of men (Merrill et al., 2001). However, according to Merrill et al., (2001), “more women (24.9%) than men (9.0%) reported being physically injured, supporting the view that the consequences of intimate partner violence are more serious for women” (p. 10). The interview data for the present study was gathered only from women because those instances of men-to-women abuse in the military context are far more frequent and
spoken of than are instances of women-to-men abuse. Thus, no statements about female to male violence are possible.

Richard Heyman and Peter Neidig (1999) compare violent tendencies of civilian and military communities. Their study revealed that “if the Army had demographics matching the 1990 U.S. Census for employed, married persons, its rates of moderate husband-to-wife violence would have been 11% ± .4 % compared with a civilian rate of 10% ± 1.5 % “ (p. 241). Heyman and Neidig (1999) maintain that these percentages are slight but significant, however, speculations concerning those influences of the military’s aggressive nature on violence and abuse will stretch beyond what empirical evidence has had to provide thus far.

Heyman and Neidig (1999) say that two factors other than “occupation-related aggressiveness” may be responsible for a “small but reliable” difference in those rates of violence for Army and civilian communities (p. 241). First, Heyman and Neidig (1999) say that because the U.S. Army is a volunteer organization, a variety of risk factors like a childhood history of abuse, alcoholism, or poverty should “be assessed and controlled before any conclusions could be made regarding the true relation between military service and heightened risk for spousal aggression” (p. 241). Second, Heyman and Neidig (1999) say “researchers interested in supporting theories about the causes of spousal aggression would have to administer additional measures related to theory rather than compare rates of spousal aggression in different populations” (p. 241-42). Similarly William Griffin and Allison Morgan (1988) found, “generally speaking, distressed military couples have marital problems similar to distressed civilian couples” (p. 20).

This review of literature highlights the key issues in understanding how abuse is
understood in the minds and stories of the abused, their friends, and their family. It suggests three important questions that will be addressed in this study:

RQ1: According to wives of military men, what issues contribute to domestic violence?

RQ2: According to friends and family members of military wives, what issues contribute to domestic violence?

RQ3: How does the language used to describe those issues contributing to domestic violence communicate attributions of blame and responsibility?
Chapter Two: Method

The current study uses a constant comparative analysis of twenty-one interviews previously conducted with wives of abusive military men, in addition to nine interviews previously conducted with the friends and family members of military wives. The researcher obtained transcripts of previously conducted interviews from the Lexis Nexis Academic Universe (LNAU) and Burrelle’s Information Services (BIS). The interviews obtained from LNAU include transcripts from The Associated Press, 60 Minutes, and The Early Show. Most transcripts obtained from BIS include interviews from The Oprah Winfrey Show’s “Murders at Fort Bragg” episode, aired on September 25th, 2002. These interviews represent nearly the entire population of available stories on domestic abuse in the military context from this archive. Interviews conducted with friends and families were utilized to represent the military wives who, because a violent spouse has murdered them, are unable to speak on their own behalf. Seventeen of the thirty interviews come from interviewees stationed at Ft. Bragg Air Force Base in Ft. Bragg North Carolina. All interviews were coded, categorized, and examined for emergent themes by way of a constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Analysis

Spradley (1980) suggests that "You must force yourself to search through your data for emerging themes or patterns: conversation topics, vocabulary, recurring activities, meanings, feelings, or folk sayings and proverbs" (as cited in Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Before discovering emergent themes, however, the researcher must begin with the unrefined data; in this case, the data consists of thirty transcripts of previously conducted interviews.
Taylor and Bogdan (1998) identify and describe two major stages of data analysis. The first stage of ongoing discovery requires the researcher to revisit the data time and time again in order to develop all available concepts. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) say, "Coding at such a very general level is a first step toward organizing the data into meaningful categories" (p. 36), while Charmaz (2002) explains that the researcher should identify general concepts with what she calls an “initial” coding process. Charmaz (2002) says, “Initial coding helps the grounded theory researcher to discover participants’ views rather than assume that the researcher and participants share views and worlds” (684). In pursuing the collection of preliminary concepts from the data collected, the present study adopts Taylor and Bogdan’s (1998) first stage of ongoing discovery by narrowing all interviews and statements down to “manageable proportions” as suggested by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003). Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) note that only the most relevant texts should be watchfully considered when taking into account specific research questions.

In the current study, the researcher examined and re-examined interview transcripts for emergent themes and issues surrounding personal accounts of domestic abuse. Following Auerbach and Silverstein (2003), this initial stage of coding identifies repeated ideas that may include words, phrases, or more general concepts. Interviews previously conducted with the wives of military men were analyzed separate from those interviews previously conducted with friends and family members of military wives. The two sets of data were compared at a later time in order to address research questions one and two. After the search for initial themes, the researcher progressed to a second and more in-depth method of analysis.
The second stage identified by Taylor and Bogdan (1998) is to refine previous findings by way of coding and categorizing data. Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) say that this second step includes a search for themes among those coded clusters and categories. As categories are linked and pieced together, interpretations, relationships, and other themes are likely to emerge from the data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). As in the research of J. Hewitt-Taylor (2001), the codes used in the present research were "generated from that data, rather than predetermined" (p. 40).

Finally, statements made by military wives (and the friends/family thereof) concerning previously established themes were de-constructed according to the talk and language used to express their perspective. The language is specifically examined for reflections and perceived attributions of who is to blame and who is responsible for spousal abuse in the military context.
Chapter Three: Results

Research Question One

Research question one addresses what issues contribute to domestic violence, according to the wives of military men. From the (twenty-one) previously conducted interviews that were reviewed by the researcher, five themes emerged. Those five themes are: “Military Negligence”, “Double Bind”, “Fort Bragg Context”, “Lack of Decompression”, and “Lack of a History of Abuse”. Themes of “Military Negligence” describe the organization’s refusal to accept blame and/or responsibility for instances of domestic violence in the military’s context. “Double Bind” describes the struggle of women who feel “stuck” in the military context. “Fort Bragg Context” is a theme that describes the uniqueness of this particular Air Force Base in Fort Bragg, North Carolina. Themes concerning “Lack of Decompression” propose that soldiers are not properly transitioned from aggressive contexts to more family oriented contexts, while themes that address a “Lack of a History of Abuse” suggest that a lack of abuse experienced prior to the military context is considered by the current research.

Theme One: “Military Negligence”

Perhaps the most prominent theme is negligence. According to the interviewed wives of military men, the military (whether it be Army, Navy, or Air Force alike) neglects the issue of domestic violence in one of three ways; 1) by refusing to correct and/or reprimand abusive soldiers, 2) by denying that domestic violence is indeed a problem to be dealt with by the military, and 3) by protecting the interests of the military, accordingly. These three facets of the military’s negligence are included as sub-themes of the broader and more general theme of “Military Negligence”.
The first way neglect occurs is when the military fails to reprimand the soldiers who have been reportedly abusive in the home. Several women noted that while the military was notified of the abuse, no corrective measures were taken and no punishments were enforced. For example, Annette LaFrancis said that although she reported several instances of abuse, her husband Chief Petty Officer Lance LaFrancis, was never charged with a crime. Mrs. LaFrancis implied that the military needed to cover up the abuse, and did not want the issue to be of public matter. On one specific occasion, Officer LaFrancis punched his wife in the face, “injuring her jaw and knocking out one of her teeth” (BIS, 2002). Although Mrs. LaFrancis reported this incident, her husband was in no way punished for his actions. In another interview from Fort Carson, Colorado, an anonymous military wife described her husband’s struggle with both depression and domestic abuse. Although she and her husband both reported concern for their family’s safety on several occasions, the soldier was ordered to return to the field. The military wife in this example noted feeling frustrated and ignored. She said, “The military does not care about me or my husband; the mission comes first” (BIS, 2002).

On several occasions, military wives insisted that although abusive husbands were encouraged to seek counseling, commanding officers were generally “very forgiving” and enforced no “real” punishment. One soldier in particular admitted to abuse and was ordered to seek anger management courses and counseling. The soldier, however, was not held accountable for those orders and independently made the decision to cease counseling, thereby forcing his wife to hide from her own home in order to avoid the ongoing abuse.

Several military wives identified a second sub theme of “Military Negligence” by
saying that the military rejects problematic abuse. Nicole Beassie said that the Air Force was her husband’s “number one enabler” and “as long as [my husband’s] superiors didn’t think his abuse was a problem, neither did he” (BIS, 2002). Roughly ten women have quoted superiors as stating that the military did not issue the soldiers a wife, and the military did not issue the soldiers a family. Those problems surrounding abuse are dismissed and defined as being a family concern rather than a problem to be dealt with by the organization.

The military will certainly not enforce a punishment to the soldier if the mentality of the organization does not recognize the issue of domestic violence as being anything more than a marital discrepancy. In fact, one anonymous military wife from Ft. Bragg noted that while her husband’s military record showed a number of domestic abuse reports, he received a good conduct award, regardless (BIS, 2002).

A second anonymous and abused military wife concurs by saying that instead of acknowledging that a problem exists in her marriage, her husband’s superiors treated both she and her husband very poorly (BIS, 2002). So, according to the wives and ex-wives of military men, the organization has neglected to punish the domestically abusive soldier, neglected to acknowledge domestic abuse as an issue to be dealt with by the military, and finally, the organization has neglected the issue of domestic violence by protecting the soldier’s interest and the interest of the military rather than being concerned with ongoing abuse in the home of the soldier.

The final sub theme of “Military Negligence” is directly connected to the military’s mentality. The soldier in question was not issued a wife and not issued a family; therefore any problems occurring in the home are left for the soldier and his
family to solve on a personal level. This third method of neglect is identified as the military’s tendency to protect the soldier first, as it is the soldier who will serve the organization. Perhaps the most startling statement concerning “Military Negligence” came from another military wife who chose to remain anonymous in order to protect her own safety. She said,

No matter what a soldier does at home behind closed doors (regardless if a wife reports him for abuse) the military will pretend to investigate, do some paperwork, and then wipe the issue under the table. The military will do whatever is necessary--anything to protect the soldier. Family is secondary and if the soldier has a problem with the spouse, [the military] would rather remove the spouse. [The soldier] needs only to function well as a soldier, and as long as he is doing that, nothing else is important (BIS, 2002).

Annette LaFrancis spoke again in reference to protecting the soldier, and said, “[the military] finds every excuse to justify what [the soldier] has done in order to protect him, but will not protect the abused one” (BIS, 2002). Many of the interviewed wives of abusive military men have expressed that with a lack of protection they feel unsafe and failed by the military. Tracy, the ex-wife of a soldier said, “I feel that the military has failed me and I truly believe that it has failed other families too” (BIS, 2002). Some women maintain that the military does not care about the victims of abuse or for the soldiers who are concerned about their own abusive behavior. The focus of the military remains with the mission, and if the soldier cannot successfully complete his mission with the military, he is no good to the organization.

It has been noted in several interviews that soldiers are harassed and perceived by the organization as being weak when they personally seek counseling. The interests of the military’s mission are protected before any issues concerning domestic abuse are to be
acknowledged and dealt with, accordingly. Seemingly, a sort of double bind is taking place within the organization as even those soldiers who seek help for their problems with abuse and anger management cannot readily take advantage of that help for fear they will be ostracized and harassed by superiors. As a result, the soldiers remain stuck in an abusive cycle of sorts.

*Theme Two: “Double Bind”*

A second major theme drawn from those interviews previously conducted is the “Double Bind”. The double bind described above is undoubtedly troublesome, but more problematic for the families of abusive military men is the double bind established by military superiors. This “Double Bind” will not allow the wife of an abusive soldier to report abuse without suffering financially. For example, one repeatedly abused (anonymous) ex-wife of a Navy soldier, explained:

> I wanted to go to his chief in search of help. My ex told me not to tell the chief what was going on because he could get in trouble and then his pay would be decreased. We were so poor and I was so afraid, so I held off on contacting him. In the meantime, I spent many nights sleeping in my car and hiding in closets in order to get away from the abuse (BIS, 2002).

A second woman from Ft. Bragg, Tracy, noted a similar experience by saying,

> It is a very serious thing when you pick up that phone and call your husband’s commanding officer. Your husband can be reduced in rank, which means a reduction in pay, and I had kids that I had to raise and support and buy food for. So, in essence, you’re damned if you do and damned if you don’t (BIS, 2002). While several abused women identified a lack of punishment as being an issue of concern, these women seem to imply that either there is no punishment enforced by the military, or conversely that punishments are so extreme that they devastate the family and leave them with little or no financial support. This notion is one that several interviewed
women struggled with.

Upon reporting abuse, abused military wives face the frustration of receiving no assistance with the problem, or the kind of assistance that does not correct the problem, but will rather leave the entire military family in despair. One final anonymous ex-wife quotes her husband’s chief commander as saying, ‘If you report the abuse and have your husband arrested again, that’s going to get him kicked out of here and you’ll be out on your butt too. Then your kids will have no support.’ This woman noted feeling threatened, confused, and “stuck” (BIS, 2002).

**Theme Three: “Fort Bragg Context”**

A third emergent theme from the interviews addresses a concern with those contexts at Fort Bragg Air Force Base in North Carolina and the Special Forces status of that base. Several women from that base have expressed a concern that the Special Forces are aggressively trained to kill. In comparison, the Army is trained only to defend. These women conclude that a large number of aggressive soldiers at Fort Bragg that have been trained to kill have created a breeding ground for exaggerated aggression and domestic abuse. One woman says that she noticed changes in her husband almost immediately when he became a member of the Special Forces at Fort Bragg. She said that her husband used Special Forces tactics in order to abuse her, and maintains that the issue is largely a Fort Bragg problem. Several women describe the Special Forces as being “completely different” than the “regular” Army and say that the Special Forces will incorporate psychological control in addition to physical aggression. A second interviewee also addressed the “Fort Bragg Context” by saying, “I don’t know what it is about Fort Bragg, but they do not give their soldiers training on how to cope with a military marriage and
family after they leave their ‘day job’ of being trained to kill and obey” (BIS, 2002).

**Theme Four: “Lack of Decompression”**

A fourth theme from the interviews conducted with military wives establishes the military’s “Lack of Decompression”. Several women discuss that when their husbands return from a period of time in the field, there is no method utilized by the military to ensure that the soldiers are able to make a smooth transition back into the home. One woman asks herself, “How can you be a dedicated no-holds-barred fighting machine on Monday and a loving and caring husband/father/son one day later?” (BIS, 2002). She remembers a time when her own father was in the military and Eleanor Roosevelt “recommended that all returning servicemen be exposed to ‘decontamination’ on return from overseas” (BIS, 2002). She says that when her father returned to the states, she and her family did not see him for several months until he was deemed fit to return to society.

Today, there is no such decontamination period, and most military wives believe that such a program would be an appropriate method of decreasing instances of domestic violence in the military context.

**Theme Five: “Lack of a History of Abuse”**

The final theme, although not as prominent in the findings, is absolutely worth noting. Some women noted that their husbands had no history of aggression or abuse before pursuing a military lifestyle. One woman, for example, says that her husband “snapped, without a single warning sign” (BIS, 2002). She went on to say, “He was the gentlest man that I had ever known” (BIS, 2002). The friends and family of military wives will describe this theme in greater detail.
Research Question Two

Research question two addresses issues contributing to domestic violence, according to the friends and family of military wives. It should be noted that the interviews previously conducted with the friends and family of military wives are being included in this data set because many of the military wives at Fort Bragg are no longer able to speak on their own behalf. From the (nine) previously conducted interviews that were reviewed by the researcher, five themes have emerged that compliment and elaborate on themes already established by the first research question. These five themes are “Lack of a History of Abuse”, “Turning Point”, “Need for Decompression”, “Military Negligence”, and “Verbal Abuse”. The “Lack of a History of Abuse” theme suggests that no abuse was experienced prior to the military context. The “Turning Point” theme discusses a time identified by friends and family as a time of drastic change in the abuser’s behavior. The “Need for Decompression” theme involves the sentiment that soldiers coming home from combat and training should be decontaminated before returning to the home. As established by research question one, a theme of “Military Negligence” describes the organization’s refusal to accept blame and/or responsibility for instances of domestic violence in the military’s context. Finally, a theme of “Verbal Abuse” accounts for those instances of verbal as opposed to physical abuse.

Theme One: “Lack of a History of Abuse”

The first emergent theme established by friends and family was the notion that abusive soldiers were not characterized as being aggressive or abusive before their time in the military. Two friends of William and Jennifer Wright (of Fort Bragg Air Force Base in North Carolina) expressed confusion when recalling that Wright could be capable
of violence against his wife. One woman says, “My husband and I were friends with both Bill and Jennifer, and from the moment we found out that Jennifer was missing, no one suspected Bill. He has always been a kind and gentle man.” She went on to claim, “The Bill we have always known would have never committed murder.” A second friend of the couple said:

There was no history of abuse in the family. We had a close relationship with this family for three years, and Bill’s personality just doesn’t fit the profile. I am aware that there were problems in the marriage and possible a divorce was pending, but there were never any signs of anything deeper. This family was a devout Christian family...(BIS, 2002).
One other friend of the family who said that infidelity was a major flaw of the relationship mentioned these “problems” of the marriage and pending divorce. And finally, Jennifer’s mother, Wilma Watson, spoke to express her own concern with the actions of her son-in-law. She said:

He was like my own child. Until he came back from Afghanistan, I didn’t worry about violence. Then he was getting these attacks of rage. She was afraid of him. I begged her to come home, but she still loved him (Associated Press, 2002).

Penny Flitcraft described a theme of uncharacteristic aggression again. Mrs. Flitcraft was the mother of Andrea Flitcraft who was murdered by her husband at Fort Bragg. Mrs. Flitcraft noted:

I believe at that moment of my daughter’s death, that that was not my son-in-law and that was not my daughter’s husband. He went somewhere he had never been before, and he took her life. He could have never lived with that, and he took his own life. And two incredibly wonderful, beautiful people were lost in that moment (CBS Worldwide Inc., 2002).

It should be noted that one woman did believe that her sister’s husband was angry and aggressive before the night that he murdered her sister. Amanda Nobles recalled that
her brother-in-law “was very double-sided.” Ms. Nobles went on to say that, “he could be the friendliest, most personable person that you would ever meet, but I think that there was always a dark side. He was always down on her. She was never good enough.” Ms. Nobles was the one and only interviewee from this data set who expressed concern for the soldier who was violent before the breaking point of extreme and fatal aggression. Other family and friends noted, instead, a “turning point” in the relationship.

*Theme Two: “Turning Point”*

A second theme established by friends and family was the “Turning Point”. In several cases of extreme abuse, friends and family have identified a specific instance said to have driven the soldier to abuse. The friends and family of military wives have identified these “Turning Points” as marital discrepancies, in many cases. For example, after repeated abuse, Andrea Flitcraft had allegedly made the decision to leave her husband, Brandon. Andrea’s sister, Amanda Flitcraft, said that it was only when Andrea verbally expressed her desire for a divorce that Brandon’s actions became fatal. Amanda says, “I think [Andrea] stood up and faced him and said, ‘I’m done. The marriage is over.’ I think that’s what put him over the edge” (BIS, 2002). Similarly, Andrea’s mother notes, “I definitely believe it-she told him that day-the day of her death she told him that she was leaving him” (BIS, 2002). Other friends and family members of military wives have implied that issues such as unwanted pregnancy and infidelity were the cause of abuse going from bad to worse. The mother of Shalamar Franceschi, who was murdered by her husband at Fort Bragg, says that the couple “started having domestic problems when my daughter conceived my grandson. He wanted her to have an abortion, but she refused” (BIS, 2002).
Several interviewees describe the drastic progression of violence with metaphor. For example, Tyniesse Harrison described Shalamar’s husband by saying, “He was a soldier that was on a lighted fuse, and he just exploded” (BIS, 2002). Other soldiers were similarly described as, “a ticking time bomb” (BIS, 2002).

*Theme Three: “Need for Decompression”*

A third emergent theme from the interviews of friends and family, also established by the wives of military men, is the need for the soldier’s decompression. Penny Flitcraft, Andrea Flitcraft’s mother, said, “I’ve learned a lot of what the training involves, and I believe that the pressure of that training is such that these men are not equipped to walk back into their home one day after coming out of a mission” (BIS, 2002). Mrs. Flitcraft goes on to say:

I’ve kind of made the silly analogy that we send people to go and explore space and they get to drink Tang, but when they come back and they are decompressed, they are kept apart from their family and friends until-you know, debriefed, so to speak, and this doesn’t happen with these Special Operations soldiers. One day, they are on whatever mission they are responsible for, and the very next day, they’re back in the heart of their families. They are over training, over processing these soldiers, and they are under serving them upon their return home (BIS, 2002).

Whereby, in another interview, a friend of a deceased military wife said:

[The soldiers]-they aren’t prepared for what they’re feeling and how to react when they come back into normal life situations. There’s no cool-down period. There’s no decompression or de briefing of any kind for these soldiers (CBS Worldwide Inc., 2002).

*Theme Four: “Military Negligence”*

A fourth theme identified by friends and family, also identified by the wives of military men, is a theme of “Military’s Negligence”. In concurrence with previous
results, friends and family of military wives have said that the military has denied the problematic nature of ongoing domestic abuse in the military context. For example, a friend of William and Jennifer Wright (of Fort Bragg Air Force Base) said, “[The abuse] could very well be related to a lack of adequate counseling and the military culture that looks down on those who seek help by perceiving them as somehow weak” (BIS, 2002). Tyniesse Harrison, a friend of Shalamar Franceschi’s (also from Fort Bragg Air Force Base), believes that if the military had punished or “taken action” against the abusive soldier, Damien, Shalamar would be alive today. She said, “When [Damien] beat her, raped her and sodomized her…for six hours…at gunpoint, that’s when the military should have taken over” (BIS, 2002). Tyniesse concluded her interview by noting that the military commanders knew about the abuse and neglected to do anything about it: “There’s no denying they knew. The system just failed her” (BIS, 2002). Both Mrs. Flitcraft and Amanda Nobles (Andrea’s sister) said that they too believe the military has neglected to assist the military families in “what they’re going through” (BIS, 2002).

Theme Five: “Verbal Abuse”

A fifth and final theme established by friends and family encompasses a less common but equally significant trend of “Verbal Abuse”. In most interviews conducted with the wives of military men and their friends and family, the interviewees spoke immediately concerning the dramatic and extensive physical abuse felt by military wives. On a few occasions in this second set of data, however, friends and family members of abused military wives noted that oftentimes, verbal abuse accompanied the physical abuse. Shalamar Franceschi’s mother, Maria, says that Shalamar spoke for two years of mentally exhausting verbal abuse. Mrs. Flitcraft and Amanda Nobles made a similar
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claim on Andrea Flitcraft’s behalf.

*Research Question Three*

The third and final research question describes how the language used to depict those ten themes previously established by the current research will communicate attributions of blame and responsibility. In other words, did the language used by interviewees implicate that blame and/or responsibility (for domestic abuse in the military context) should be placed with the abuser, with the abuser’s spouse, with the military as an organization, or with the military’s context? Because as Duck (1994) notes, it’s not just *what* the speaker says, but *how* he/she says it; pregnant pauses, significant omissions, and the un-spoken, for example, are components of conversation that Duck (1994) says may have much more to say about the interviewee’s attributions of blame and responsibility than what was actually said by those persons.

Duck (1994) maintains that language will illustrate “the way the speaker construes and understands the world” (12). Accordingly, analyzing the language of interviewees has revealed where attributions of blame and responsibility were made although the wives, family, and friends of the military context have not, in some cases, made those attributions forthright. This final segment of the results analyzes the talk ascribed to by interviewees, and applies attributions of blame and responsibility accordingly.

From those interviews conducted with (and statements made by) military wives, family, and friends, collectively, blame and responsibility was placed on the organization rather than the abuser. These interviewees have been noted as attributing blame and responsibility outright by stating that the military has, in several instances, neglected to
address problems associated with domestic abuse. The issues that are addressed are not appropriately dealt with, according to interviewees, as punishments are not readily enforced. Both of these cases have been established by thematic analysis.

Implicit in these outright allegations, however, is the notion that the abusers may be free of blame. One previously cited military wife, for example, has said that although she wanted to report the abuse she was suffering at the hand of her husband, she knew that she could not because the military would then leave her family without financial support. So rather than using language that would imply that this military wife held her husband responsible for his own behavior, she instead placed blame for the ongoing abuse on the organization. Several other women have placed the blame with the organization by noting the military’s “mission first” mentality.

A second military wife made sure to mention in her interview that the military did not care for her or for her husband, the abuser, thereby implying that he too was a blame-free victim who needed caring for. Other women speak of feeling failed by the organization, but again neglect to mention being failed by their husbands. When interviewed, every military wife, family member, and friend implicitly or explicitly placed blame and responsibility with the organization. Either the military was noted as being to blame for the abuse by not recognizing the problems associated with domestic abuse, or responsible for the abuse by not issuing punishments or assisting the soldiers and their families appropriately.

While several interviewees have placed a level of blame and responsibility on the military rather than on the abuser because of the military’s denial and neglect, other interviewees have placed the blame and responsibility on the nature of the organization.
Previously established themes have revealed that military wives, family, and friends believe that a factor contributing to domestic abuse in the military context is the aggressive method by which soldiers are trained, in addition to a lack of decompression. The interviewee’s talk, then, indicates that blame and responsibility for the abuse may be placed, once again, with the organization rather than the abuser. The abuser is framed as being just another victim of the intense training and lack of assistance in decompression processes. One statement previously cited, in fact, notes that the base at Fort Bragg, specifically, will not “give their soldiers training on how to cope with a military marriage and family after they leave their ‘day job’ of being trained to kill and obey” (BIS, 2002). It’s as if the interviewees don’t expect soldiers to behave appropriately without the assistance of the organization.

Similarly, the talk and language expressed by military wives, family, and friends implies that not only the nature of the organization is to blame, but also the nature of the surrounding contexts is responsible for abusive episodes. As thematic analysis has previously established, some military wives (and several family and friends) have said that their husband’s were not abusive until immersed in the military context. Therefore, the military context absorbs any blame and responsibility that would, in the civilian community, be placed with the abuser himself. Interviewees did not, in any case, maintain that the abusive soldier should have taken any blame for his behavior, but several did expect the soldiers to take responsibility for abusive behaviors by way of punishment. Again, it is not the abuser who will punish himself—he must wait on the organization to issue a punishment, thereby absolving the soldier of some responsibility. Without the enforcement of a punishment, interviewees didn’t seem to suggest that the
abuser should in any way try to help himself.

Interestingly, none of those military wives interviewed have stated that when the abuse began they should have left the abusive environment. Of course, some of those ex-wives who were interviewed did leave, but those who reported on-going issues with abuse neglected to place any blame with themselves. These women don’t blame their husband’s to any degree either, but rather maintain that the military’s aggressive context, neglect to punish, and neglect to decompress are to blame for the instances of domestic abuse in the military context. In fact, several women excuse their husband’s behavior by noting that the soldiers didn’t know how to react to their aggressive surroundings and they didn’t know how to transition back into the home without then becoming abusive. Without knowing how to cope, the abusive soldiers remain free of blame in the eyes of most military wives, family and friends. Another previously cited friend of a deceased military wife, for example, notes that the soldiers aren’t prepared for what they are feeling and aren’t prepared to return into “normal” contexts such as the home. In addition to not blaming the soldier, again, it should be noted that no family member or friend previously interviewed mentioned that a deceased military wife should have left the home before the abuse turned fatal.
Chapter Four: Discussion

The first two research questions proposed by the current study uncovered a total of ten themes that reflect what military wives, and their friends and family note as factors contributing to instances of domestic violence in the military context. These results from both research questions are discussed together here because the two sets of data (five themes established by military wives, and five themes established by the friends and family thereof) overlap and support one another a great deal. The first part of the discussion, then, focuses on relating these findings to the previous literature on domestic abuse. The theme established by the current research that is most supported by the literature is that of violence being fostered by the aggression of the military context. And although several other themes are discussed as they are supported by the research, there are several themes unique to the military contexts that are not. The second part of the discussion applies theories of attribution regarding blame and responsibility to the language used by the interviewees (military wives and the friends and family thereof) in answering the third and final research question proposed by the study.

The literature surrounding domestic abuse can be used to explain several of the themes identified by the military community in the current study by first noting that the environment in which domestic abuse occurs will likely be a factor contributing to the issue. As previously indicated, several military wives have implied that the aggressive environments in which their families reside have driven their husbands to become violent and abusive. This is consistent with Eigenberg’s (2001) theories of society and culture that attribute abusive episodes like those described by this study to the aggressive surroundings of the military context. Thus, one factor contributing to the recurring
violence in the military context according to military wives, the friends and family thereof, and the literature on abuse will be the general military environment in which these families exist.

Theories of the individual in relation to society and culture will say, similarly, that violence and aggression may be attributed to social learning. In other words, the men absorb violence and aggression from the military context as they are trained to fight and perform as soldiers. Several interviewees noted this process of social learning by describing the Special Forces Operations at Fort Bragg Air Force Base as “teaching” soldiers to not only defend their country, but to fight forcefully and kill. Most previously interviewed military wives who maintain that their husband’s aggression and abuse was not problematic until the couple became involved in the military context would seem likely to subscribe to these theories of the individual, society, and culture.

On the other hand, family theories of domestic abuse would attribute the instances of abuse described by the current study to the family structure (Eigenberg, 2001). Thus, while the military wives would perhaps subscribe to theories of social learning or social influence in order to explain the abuse that they have experienced, the military as an organization refuses responsibility by attributing instances of violence and abuse to marital discrepancies rather than a contextual or social influence. Interviewees have noted the military as maintaining that the organization did not issue soldiers a wife and the organization did not issue soldiers a family, therefore, any problems inside of the home are to be dealt with by the family rather than the military. The military as an organization, then, is more likely to subscribe to family theories rather than attributing violence and aggression to the context in which it occurs, as would a social and cultural theories
subscribed to by military wives.

Other sources continue to support the theme of contextual influence. The research conducted by Jenkins and Davidson (2001), for instance, suggest two additional dimensions of abuse that may be applicable to the military context. These dimensions or discourses attribute violent behavior to either the norms and practices of socialization processes or to violent behavior that is learned and experienced. Certainly, there is a great deal of learned and experienced violent behavior in the military context, as was previously noted by military wives and family/friends. Jenkins and Davidson (2001) and Cahn (1996) each note the importance of considering context by saying that in order to understand a battered woman’s experience, the social context should indeed be taken into consideration. In fact, research from Torres and Han (2003) says that a level of physical abuse may likely be associated with whether the offender has been violent outside of the family unit, or not. Certainly, those soldiers moving from the home to the field are expectantly violent in the military context. Hampton et al. (1999) notes, “In relation to marital violence, social learning theory predicts that someone who has witnessed or experienced a great deal of violence will model that type of behavior him- or herself” (p. 49).

White, Merrill, and Koss (2001) also support this notion of context by saying that “situational factors increase the likelihood of conflict in relationships” (p. 912). The military context presents unique situational variables that are unlike those of the civilian community. For example, it has become obvious to the researcher that extreme and aggressive stress is a large part of living the life of a soldier and military wife alike. Previously conducted interviews have indicated that the greater part of this tremendous
stress comes from the aggressive context of a governmental profession that demands
excellence, in addition to the consistent deployment of officers. And according to
Colonel Tad Davis of Fort Bragg North Carolina, just living the military life is likely to
“increase a person’s stress tremendously” (CBS Worldwide Inc., 2002). Domestic abuse
in the military context, then, would be of no surprise to Eigenberg (2001) who maintains
that stress may indeed contribute to a man’s tendency to be violent.

Delores Johnson, the Director of Family Programs for the US Army takes an
opposing point of view and defends the military as an organization by saying, “Stress
doesn’t cause domestic violence” (BIS, 2002). Despite the testimony of several military
wives, Ms. Johnson repeatedly denies responsibility for instances of domestic violence on
behalf of the organization. It is unclear in the research as to what will drive some stressed
soldiers to abuse while others seem to handle the stress more calmly, but the research on
domestic abuse will suggest that traits such as alcohol and drug misuse, violent
backgrounds, and a history of violent behavior may also contribute to (but not cause) the
tendencies of men to be violent with a spouse. The previously conducted interviews
analyzed by the researcher do not seem to suggest that the abusive men in those cases had
any previous experience with substance abuse and/or violence. In fact, the final theme
established by the military wives is that of non-violence. In other words, the wives and
ex-wives of military men maintained that their husbands had no history of aggression or
abuse before pursuing a military lifestyle, and the friends and family of these women
establish the theme even more strongly by noting that the soldiers were indeed gentle
men not expected to abuse or murder their military wives. This is where the theme of the
“Turning Point” comes in also, as friends and family of military wives note that the
abusive military husbands seemed to “snap” in most cases rather than carrying on a long history of abuse. Although the literature will suggest that alcohol and drug misuse additionally may contribute to the issue, only two women note that their husbands resorted to alcohol and drug abuse as a result of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder upon returning home from the field.

One woman in particular, the aforementioned Delores Johnson, speaks strongly against the major themes that have been revealed by most of those previously interviewed spouses, friends, and family members of abusive soldiers. For example, despite the claims made by the military wives, Ms. Johnson maintains that the frequency of domestic abuse at Fort Bragg is not unique to Fort Bragg or to Special Operations Officers. In fact, Ms. Johnson consistently argues that the domestic abuse in these cases isn’t a matter of the “Fort Bragg Context”, but rather a family-oriented issue that may be resolved with the help of readily available counseling. Ms. Johnson says that there is plenty of help accessible to the soldier should he choose to take advantage of it. But what Ms. Johnson doesn’t note is the “Double Bind” previously established by the research. Ms. Johnson perhaps isn’t aware that when soldiers attempt to seek counseling, that they are threatened and harassed by commanding officers who want these men to remain active in the field, and nothing more.

In addition to Ms. Johnson’s account of the military’s role in the abuse, the soldiers themselves have spoken out on occasion, lending support to the themes established by the current research. For example, one anonymous soldier, in reference to the theme of “Military Negligence”, said, “The system is inherently set up to protect the interests of the active duty person, sometimes to the point of blatant cover-ups” (BIS,
2002). The soldier went on to note that when punishments are issued, there is no follow-up by the organization, thereby leaving the abusive soldier responsible for his own behavior. The soldier references one officer in particular who after assaulting his wife made a personal choice to not attend counseling sessions, and then was promoted to Sergeant status a short time later.

In reference to those themes concerning stress and decompression, a second anonymous soldier said that a large amount of the stress at Fort Bragg comes from the fact that the base is “a highly deployable unit” (BIS, 2002). The soldier concluded the statement by noting that the army will train a person to kill and the life of a soldier, then, is certainly not easy. As soldiers are trained to kill, it is no surprise that “between 1997 and 2001, more than 10,000 cases of spouse abuse a year have been sustained in the armed forces, and of those cases, 114 were homicides of adults, according to military records” (Associated Press, 2002). And while the military defines domestic violence as “acts of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse” (Associated Press, 2002), it seems that the organization unofficially denies that instances of violence are significant enough for punishments to be enforced by the military.

The second segment of the discussion, now, turns to the third and final research question. The third research question has asked the researcher to analyze the talk of military wives, family, and friends in order to describe where those members of the military community will attribute blame and responsibility for instances of domestic abuse in the military context. The results have indicated that while military wives, family, and friends place much blame and responsibility with the military as an organization, in addition to the aggressive nature of the military context, none seemed to place blame to a
large degree with the abusive soldier or to any degree with the abused. Excuses were made on the part of the abuser, and omission of any discussion concerning self-blame will lead the researcher to believe that the abused (and friends and family thereof) have placed little or no blame with the wives who remained in the home with the abuser. This discussion will focus, then, on linking these attributions with the literature.

Where internal and external factors are concerned, it would seem that external dynamics (as opposed to internal dynamics) have been established as factors contributing to domestic abuse. Factors such as context and neglect on the part of the military as an organization have been placed with both blame and responsibility, in large part, therefore dismissing potential contributing internal dynamics that may additionally contribute to the issue. Internal dynamics that may contribute to the issue, like the character and personality traits of the abuser, were said by interviewees to be a non-issue. Those internal dynamics became a non-issue as the military wives, family, and friends maintain that the abusers were not violent until introduced to the aggressive nature of the military context, thereby again placing the blame and responsibility both with the dynamics external to or surrounding the abuse that are the context and organization of the military.

In addition to internal versus external components of attribution, Weiner (1990) notes an issue of controllability that would seem to be largely applicable to the present research. Weiner (1990) implies that if the abused were to attribute negative events to controllable causes, anger would be increased. With uncontrollable causes, however, pity as opposed to anger may be evoked. Although abused military wives do not seem to pity their abusive husbands, the friends and family of those military wives seemed to have pity on the abusers in several instances, maintaining that the abuser was just not
completely responsible for his behavior. The abusers were described in several instances as being ill prepared to deal with their feelings, and Mrs. Flitcraft, specifically, says that when her son-in-law killed her daughter and then himself, “two incredibly wonderful, beautiful people were lost in that moment” (BIS, 2002). Mrs. Flitcraft certainly doesn’t seem angry, but rather sad. Perhaps if Mrs. Flitcraft had attributed the causes of abuse to her son-in-law’s character and personality rather than the external, less controllable dynamics of the aggressive environment in which he dwelled, she would have been angrier.

Where attribution and responsibility are concerned, specifically, Fincham, Bradbury, and Grych (1990) say that in order to be held responsible for his behavior, the abuser must appreciate the wrongfulness of his behavior, have an alternative “conflict-avoidant” behavior, and have the ability to carry out that alternative behavior. The interviewees have implied, however, that the abusers are not able to appreciate the wrongfulness of their behavior as they have been desensitized to violence and aggression through the intensity of the military context. Without this initial appreciation of the wrongfulness of behavior, then, abusive soldiers won’t likely explore alternative behaviors in order to break the cycles of abuse or be held responsible for abusive behaviors. Instead, the soldiers remain immersed in an environment that will deny domestic abuse as a problem and continue to foster aggression and violence. Shaver (1985), similarly, has established several stages of personal responsibility, one of which may be applicable to those attributions made by military wives, family, and friends. Justification seems to be a common method of making the military as an organization responsible for the actions of the abusive soldiers. Interviewees have, in most every case,
indicated that if the military were to decompress soldiers, acknowledge the issue, and punish soldiers accordingly, domestic abuse in the military context wouldn’t be an issue.

Not only do interviewees hold the military organization and context responsible for instances of domestic abuse, rather than insisting that the abuser be held accountable for his own actions, but military wives, family, and friends place blame with the military organization and context, additionally. Some members of the military community outright stated that they blame the organization for ongoing abuse, while others simply implied that soldiers are victims of the context that has taught them to be aggressive and violent. Further, the stories told by military wives, friends, and family do not reference the marital relationship as a factor in accounting for the abuse. This means, implicitly, that they do not recognize how, then, relational dynamics can reinforce the abuse. Hence, a more dyadic explanation of the abuse might actually move them to a more powerful position with respect to the abuse.

In sum, it should of course be noted that, as Eigenberg (2001) says, domestic violence is a complicated issue that must explore not only the individual characteristics of the man and woman involved, but also the structure of the relationship, and the role of society in that structure. The present research is concerned only with exploring the perceptions and opinions of wives of military men concerning what issues they believe will contribute to domestic violence in the military context. The inferences made by those perceptions and opinions are backed by research that says that an aggressive, stressful, and consistently violent context will likely lead to domestic abuse. There is of course no literature to directly defend those themes of the military’s neglect and lack of decompression as those themes are unique to the military context where literature is
limited, but the frequency and strength of the testimony from which those themes stem will in the researcher’s opinion be support enough.

**Limitations of the Study**

There are two primary limitations of the study that should be considered. First, due to the nature of the topic at hand, previously conducted interviews have been analyzed, therefore participants were not available to the researcher for more focused, follow-up interview questions. Further, beyond a knowledge of their military association, no specific demographic information was available. This means that the researcher treated each transcript without knowing the demographics for the interviewed wives, family, or friends, limiting her ability to interpret other potential contributing factors.

A second concern lies in qualitative categorization of themes. The researcher has pulled emergent issues, and although Charmaz (2002) notes that when constructing meaning the researchers own thinking should be reflected, it is the researcher’s hope that themes and categories have been chosen objectively in order to most accurately represent the participants’ perspective.

**Future Research**

Future research in the area of domestic abuse and the military context should perhaps include the background and perceptions of abusive soldiers. The present study included participants that have represented only one side of a complicated scenario. Therefore, exploring the perceptions of the abuser (in addition to the abused) would allow for a more accurate and well-rounded depiction of these instances of abuse (in the military context). Although some members of the military have been cited in the present research, knowing what factors abusive soldiers believe contribute to domestic violence
(in the military context) would certainly be a step in the direction of exposing every angle of this convoluted issue.

Having the opportunity to speak with the abuser would additionally allow for demographic and background information to be investigated, perhaps revealing significant internal contributing factors. The present research analyzed previously conducted interviews, therefore demographic and background information on the abusive soldiers was limited. Speaking with the abuser himself will likely allow for the researcher to explore history, habit, and character traits that may drive the soldier to abuse, despite military contexts, military negligence, and the like.

Finally, because military wives, friends, and family have readily placed blame and responsibility alike with the military as an organization, rather than discussing what factors of the marital relationship may have contributed to the abuse, future research should seek to further explore those dyadic issues that may likely allow for the exposure of other insights and contributing factors of abuse. A communicative focus on interviews conducted with the men and women of the military context will likely drive the research toward a more dyadic approach to the issues surrounding domestic abuse in the military context.
References


