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# Enmeshment in Military Families

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## ABSTRACT

While most research regarding enmeshment has been decidedly negative, researchers analyzing diverse cultures have found that enmeshment can act as a healthy tool for family members. This thesis examines the limits of healthy enmeshment and focuses on military families. It strives to answer whether enmeshment can be a tool utilized to keep the family safely together. This thesis combines narrative and grounded analysis to determine that military families can experience variations of enmeshment that can be healthy and safe.

Enmeshment in Military Families

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Marriage and Family Studies

Abilene Christian University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Marriage and Family Therapy

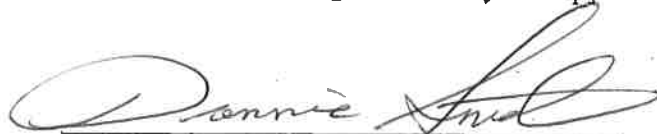
By

Alexus Hamilton

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Master of Marriage and Family Therapy



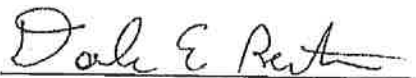
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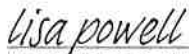
Thesis Committee



Dale E. Bertram, Chair



Lisa Merchant



lisa powell (Mar 29, 2019)

Lisa Powell

For my father, Gus Hamilton,  
To my sister, Olivia Hamilton,  
and because of my mother, Deborah Hamilton.

We sow seeds.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my family, thank you. To my friends, thank you.

To everyone who had a hand in guiding this project, thank you.

And to Dr. Dale Bertram,

thank you.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Overview and Definitions**

Enmeshment in families in the United States has become increasingly more prevalent. Research regarding enmeshment and the impact that it has on individuals and families has been decidedly negative. Research states that enmeshed families have a higher probability of having anxiety (Barber & Buehler, 1996), eating disorders (Karwautz et al., 2003), depressive symptoms (Jacobvitz, Hazen, Curran, & Hitchens, 2004), as well as various other mental disorders (Jewell & Stark, 2003). Could enmeshment be viewed as a necessary tool to keep the family together? According to some research, no. This conclusion is derived from viewing the research through a lens deprived of diversity. Researchers often combine two separate processes: closeness, which promotes a secure attachment and mutual cohesion; and intrusive overinvolvement, which promotes dysfunctional maladaptive strategies and patterns (Irving & Benjamin, 2002). Enmeshment is usually viewed through the lens of majority family values and norms. This has resulted in an emergence of a cultural-deficit model. If researchers placed a diversity-appreciative lens on top of the research and remove the portion of the definition of enmeshment that assumes intrusive overinvolvement, then researchers may conclude that these families maintain a healthy and balanced emotional connection.

There are two purposes of this narrative study. The first is to understand the enmeshment levels of military families in their homes. The second is to determine if healthy enmeshment is possible in military families. *Enmeshment* in this study will be generally defined as excessive emotional closeness, spending little time with individuals outside of the family, and being excessively dependent on one another in the family (Irving & Benjamin, 2002).

### **Statement of the Problem**

While there is an abundance of research regarding enmeshment (Ivanochko, 2018), there is very little research regarding the impact of enmeshment on military families. There is research pertaining to how deployment affects a military family's resiliency (Clark, O'Neal, Conley, & Mancini, 2018). However, there is a gap in research combining military families and their enmeshment levels.

### **Research Questions**

Although there are many studies regarding enmeshment and its impact on individuals and families (Ivanochko, 2018), there has been little progress in building research for enmeshment's impact on military families. This study will strive to fill this gap and answer the following questions:

- 1) How does military life impact enmeshment levels in the family?
  - a) How does enmeshment help regulate closeness in the military family?
  - b) Is enmeshment a tool used to keep the family united?
- 2) How has their enmeshment level or level of cohesion changed before, during, and after deployments?

## **Rationale of Research**

It is possible that due to the nature of the military (numerous deployments and the uncertainty of being reunited with the family) that enmeshment in military families is more prevalent than in civilian families. Preparing military families for the possibility of enmeshment could decrease some of the mental disorders associated with enmeshment and decrease the amount of stress placed on an already strained family. It is crucial for family therapists to understand the resiliency and strength of military families' structures that have been previously labeled as dysfunctional.

Increasing a military family's understanding of their changing family dynamics and the way that the military person reintegrates back into society could help decrease the amount of stress placed on the family. War is oxymoronic in that it simultaneously divides and unites people; and in that unity, war satisfies a person's desire for connectedness. However, after months of war, during which military members all but ignore race, religion and political differences within their squadron, they return to the United States to find a nation that is basically at war with itself (Junger, 2016). It may be because of this reason that military families become closer. The military member turns to their family in order to fill the void that was previously filled by the member's fellow soldiers. It could simply be out of habit that the military member continues to fill that connectedness with their family.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

#### **Enmeshment**

Individuals from enmeshed families are characterized by excessive emotional closeness, spending very little time with individuals outside of the family, and are excessively dependent on each other (Olson, 2000). Family enmeshment focuses on excessively close alliances and dependence within the family system, demonstrated through entangled relationships (Borelli, Margolin, & Rasmussenet, 2015). This study utilized these definitions to determine if the participants were enmeshed.

#### **The Circumplex Model**

Enmeshment is a part of the Circumplex Model, which was developed by Dr. David Olson. There are four levels of cohesion ranging from disengaged (very low) to separated (low to moderate) to connected (moderate to high) to enmeshed (very high) (Pirutinsky & Kor, 2013). It is hypothesized that the central or balanced levels of cohesion (separated and connected) make for optimal family functioning. The extremes or unbalanced levels (disengaged or enmeshed) are generally seen as problematic for relationships over the long term (Olson, 2000). However, the data from various other studies reveals that the predictive value of enmeshment may be culturally bound, and specifically beneficial or less detrimental to cultures that are not strongly influenced by Western ideas.

## **Tenants and Contributing Factors of Healthy Families in Relation to Boundaries and Cohesion**

Because stressful experiences affect the whole family, the resilience and recovery of all members and relationships is mediated by key family processes, including family belief systems, communication, and organizational patterns. Shared family meaning and beliefs contribute to a family's ability to navigate difficult circumstances and are facilitated by clear and open communication. Examples include mutual empathy, tolerance, humor, collaborative problem solving (Mmari, Bradshaw, Sudhinaraset, & Blum, 2010). High-functioning families typically have a strong hierarchical organization (i.e., parents are firm and consistent in conveying and enforcing family rules and roles) with clear structural boundaries that define who belongs in a family system or subsystem and how they can participate. However, resilient families also emphasize connectedness in the provision of mutual support and respect (i.e., cohesion) and demonstrate flexibility in adapting to new challenges (Mmari et al., 2010). Consequently, healthy family boundaries are balanced; they act as an interface that should allow the interaction of individual autonomy and relational cohesion within the family system but should also be flexible and permeable enough for families to benefit from external social and economic resources without unnecessary intrusion from the outside world (Mmari et al., 2010).

### **Impact of Enmeshment on Children**

Findings from various authors explain the negative consequences of enmeshed Western families that value an individualistic society. Children from enmeshed families have been associated with a number of psychopathologies including anorexia nervosa (Karwautz et al., 2003), bulimia nervosa (Humphrey, 1989), depressive symptoms



(Jacobvitz et al., 2004) and disorders (Jewell & Stark, 2003), as well as symptoms of attention-deficit or hyperactivity disorder (Jacobvitz et al., 2004). The majority of these findings conclude that enmeshment yields anxiety in children.

Researchers have found that enmeshment and overprotection load strongly onto the same cluster (Wood et al., 1989), and studies have yielded significant positive relationships between family enmeshment and parental control (Craddock, Church, & Sands, 2009). Findings such as these suggest that the relationship between enmeshment and child anxiety may be similar to the relationship between over-control or protection and child anxiety in both direction and magnitude. It has been suggested that family enmeshment may be detrimental to children's social and emotional development due to the increased flexibility in family roles characteristic of families high in this construct (Sturge-Apple, Davies, & Cummings, 2010).

The relationship between family enmeshment and anxiety has been examined and shown to be significant (Barber & Buehler, 1996; Peleg-Popko & Dar, 2001). This relationship between family enmeshment and anxiety has been found in anxious adolescents and their families (Barber & Buehler, 1996), as well as anxious children between the ages of five and six and their families (Peleg-Popko & Dar, 2001).

### **Healthy Enmeshment**

Historically, research has concluded that enmeshment has been a maladaptive tool used to keep the family together. Research is saturated with the idea that enmeshment is unhealthy in relationships. However, emerging research found that culture may be a factor in whether or not the enmeshed relationship is healthy or unhealthy.

**Jews.** Healthy enmeshment can be found in the Jewish culture. This religious ideology shapes family life in Israel and in other Orthodox communities. Attitudes towards the family generally focus on its pivotal role in the raising of children and transmission of religious values (Brownstein, 2009). Marriage does not focus on romance, but rather on raising a family, although couples generally share intimacy and love (Goshen-Gottstein, 1987; Schnall, Pelcovitz, & Fox, 2013). Parents, particularly fathers, are religiously obligated to provide religious education for their children (Krieger, 2010; Maimonides, 1990), and they are held accountable for maintaining religious-cultural norms and boundaries within families (Agudath Israel of America, 2006). Consequently, families are hierarchically ordered and children are expected to honor and obey their parents, and by extension God (Wieselberg, 1992). Empirical evidence supports this relationship between parenting and religious development, and suggests that parent-child relational factors are indeed important to the transmission of religious values within this community (Herzbrun, 1993; Ringel, 2008). The family is a key organizing structure within the Orthodox Jewish community (Wieselberg, 1992). One study concluded that while the Circumplex Model has garnered significant support (Kouneski, 2002), the universality of this conceptualization can be questioned, as the model fits Orthodox Jewish families poorly (Pirutinsky & Kor, 2013). Additionally, some of the study's discrepant findings, such as the high correlation between balanced cohesion and flexibility and the positive correlation between enmeshment and disengagement, parallel results in other samples and challenge assumptions inherent in the Circumplex Model of family functioning.

**Lesbians.** Therapists who work with couples have often claimed that enmeshment occurs more frequently and intensely in lesbian relationships than in heterosexual or gay male relationships (Krestan & Bepko, 1980; Lindenbaum, 1985; Pearlman, 1989). Studies examining relationship satisfaction of lesbian couples have found that some lesbian partners report being greatly satisfied with high levels of closeness (O'Brien, 2003; Salisbury, 2003; Schreurs & Buunk, 1995) and moderate levels of enmeshment in their relationships (Greene, Causby, & Miller, 1999). One study found that women who showed greater closeness (i.e., greater warmth, nurturance, physical intimacy, and time spent together) reported greater satisfaction in their relationships. These findings are consistent with past research showing positive associations between closeness caregiving or cohesion and dyadic adjustment (Green, Bettinger, & Zacks, 1996; O'Brien, 2003; Salisbury, 2003), and intimacy and satisfaction in lesbian relationships (Greene et al., 1999; Schreurs & Buunk, 1995). Salisbury (2003) found that higher levels of closeness-caregiving were not associated with lower relationship satisfaction and suggested that, for some lesbian couples, there may not be such a thing as too much closeness. As other authors have suggested, enmeshment in lesbian relationships could simply reflect high degrees of love, trust, and commitment between partners (Biaggio, Coan, & Adams, 2002).

**African Americans.** One study reported enmeshment in African-American families is positively correlated with high ego identity (Watson & Protinsky, 1988). The study proposed the reason may be due to the large percentage who came from single-parent households. The study reported that single-parent families may become more cohesive as an adaptive response to stress (Watson & Protinsky, 1988). Fuhrman and

Holmbeck (1995) found that African-American adolescents displaying greater emotional autonomy (an indicator of lower family enmeshment) showed more behavioral problems and lower grade point averages. In these cultures, enmeshment is used as a tool to maintain family togetherness. If this idea was applied to enmeshed military families, then the negative stigma attached to enmeshment would not apply to these cases.

**Asian Americans.** Another study analyzed the link between eating disorders and enmeshment in Anglo and Asian Americans (Tomiya & Mann, 2008). They found that enmeshment did not relate to eating disorder pathology in Asian-American participants. In Anglo Americans, however, enmeshment positively predicted eating disorder pathology. They examined each participant's cultural value orientation. There was no association between enmeshment and eating disorder pathology that emerged for those participants with high levels of interdependence, but a positive association emerged for those participants with high levels of independence and low levels of interdependence. They further stated that one implication for the findings is that Minuchin's model of enmeshment may be valid in the independent cultural context in which he studied the etiology of anorexia nervosa (1970). Given high enmeshment, only those holding an independent cultural value orientation should show high levels of eating disorder pathology.

**Koreans.** Chun and MacDermid (1997) found that Korean adolescents reporting more intergenerational fusion with their parents (i.e., higher family enmeshment) tended to have higher self-esteem. They further state that their findings may reflect cultural variance and may challenge the theoretical base of family therapy developed in the US, which believes that individuation from the family of origin is needed for functional

development and adjustment. Unlike the researchers who found that Koreans received functional impacts of enmeshment, there was no impact found with Italians who were enmeshed.

**Italians.** Research shows that families who value a more collectivistic society may benefit from enmeshment. Manzi, Vignoles, Regalia, and Scabini, (2006) reported that in their study, enmeshment was predictive of anxiety and depressive symptoms for British participants, but not predictive of psychological well-being for Italian participants. For British participants, increased enmeshment levels led to significantly increased identity threat. This in turn led to lower levels of life satisfaction and higher levels of depressive symptoms and anxiety. In contrast, for Italian subjects, there were no significant effects of enmeshment on identity threat, life satisfaction, depressive symptoms, or anxiety. This cultural difference is consistent with the stronger emphasis on individual autonomy in British compared to Italian culture. The researchers argued that these differences were attributable to cultural differences. Specifically, they asserted that British youth are socialized to place greater value on individual autonomy than Italian youth, making enmeshment, or limited individual autonomy, more problematic for British youth.

Another study found Italian adolescents reporting greater family enmeshment did not experience more depressive symptoms or anxiety as they approached the transition from secondary school (Manzi et al., 2006). They went further to state that their findings suggest that distinctiveness and autonomy are present and valued only in some cultural contexts and that the process of individuation and differentiation from the family of

origin, far from being a human universal, may be specific to AngloSaxon cultures. There is even more research of the healthy impacts of family cohesion on the individual.

**Enmeshment and Cohesion.** Some researchers have argued that enmeshment is an extreme version of cohesion (Barber & Buehler, 1996). Cohesion has beneficial effects on each of the three psychological well-being outcomes (anxiety, depressive symptoms, and life satisfaction) across ethno-racial groups. Family cohesion provides a sense of stability that enhances adaptive functioning in general, which may be manifest in a wide range of psychological outcome variables (e.g., Minuchin, 1974; Olson, 1982; Scabini, 1985). Empirical findings have supported this (e.g., Barber & Buehler; Campbell, Adams, & Dobson, 1984; Manzi et al., 2006; Watson & Protinsky, 1988).

### **Military Life**

Since 2001, multiple and extended deployments have been a routine part of life for many military families. The U.S. Army, for example, has deployed over 1.1 million soldiers since 2001 in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Operation Enduring Freedom, and Operation New Dawn (McHugh & Casey, 2011). Regardless of the service branch, many military members have spouses and children who are affected by the challenges presented by military life. The difficulties presented by lengthy separations, frequent relocations, and potential injury to the military family member create unique family issues that require special consideration and attention by individuals familiar with military life.

### **Military Culture**

Researchers have failed to come up with a single definition of culture. Culture includes ethnic cultures, gendered cultures, organizational cultures, national cultures, and

community cultures (Reeves-Ellington & Yammarino, 2010). Because there is no clear understanding of what culture is, researchers see wide variation in research methodology. For example, some researchers examine the learned behaviors and perceptions of specific individuals in order to arrive at an understanding of those individuals' cultural traditions (Segall, Lonner, & Berry, 1998). From this viewpoint, society is studied through individuals, and one learns about culture indirectly. From another viewpoint, an ethnic or class group that forms part of a larger society and that may be part of one's cultural identity is labeled a subculture (Gelder, 2007); in this view, culture is seen mainly as a collection of "activity groups," defined as sets of societies contained within an overarching, dominant one. A third approach to culture is to discover and itemize cultural universals. These are learned behavior patterns that are shared by all of humanity collectively.

The military culture is undergoing fundamental social change. Two models have emerged: the traditional military model and the evolving model (Dunivin, 1997). Both models operate out of a traditional combat masculine warrior (CMW) paradigm. This paradigm is a fundamental belief system that shapes the types of models (representations of reality) we create to organize and explain our social world. The CMW paradigm is the foundation of the U.S. military culture in that it influences how the U.S. military views soldiering and how it equips and trains its members. The military's core activity is combat, and its primary job is to fight and win wars. Soldiering has been viewed as a masculine role because combat has been generally defined as men's work (Binkin & Bach, 1977). This has resulted in a deeply entrenched culture of masculinity defined by masculine norms, values, and lifestyles, that has pervaded U.S. military culture. These

factors have made what the traditional military culture. The traditional model is characterized by this social conservatism a homogeneous, predominantly male force with masculine values and norms, and exclusionary laws and practices (Dunivin, 1997). In former times, the traditional model of military culture complemented the CMW paradigm; thus military culture was characterized by exclusion, as minorities and women were routinely excluded from military service or limited in their participation (Dunivin, 1997). From its gender-segregated worldview, the U.S. military maintained distinct gender roles and restricted women to a limited sphere of military service. The military also banned homosexuals, rationalizing that homosexuality was incompatible with military service. At the other end of the spectrum is an evolving model characterized by social egalitarianism, a socially heterogeneous force with diverse values and norms, and inclusionary laws and policies.

Some researchers have argued that traditionalists have a distorted view of soldiering—nostalgically mythical and simplistic given today’s complex and diverse military. They further their argument in saying that since the warrior role is synonymous with masculinity, the restriction of women from this role becomes a priority for men who view the combat masculine warrior as a role exclusive to men (Enloe, 1993). While both models of military culture simultaneously operate in today’s U.S. armed forces, the evolving model suggests where the trends of change in military culture are headed. Moreover, it was concluded that the evolving model contradicts the military’s entrenched CMW paradigm; thus, we see conflict between cultural continuity (embodied by the CMW paradigm and its traditional model of exclusion) and cultural change (personified by the evolving model of diversity and inclusion). The CMW paradigm, however,



remains the key to military culture because its assumptions and beliefs shape both models.

### **Impact of Deployments on Marriages**

While the impact of more frequent and longer deployments on the military family is only beginning to be understood, it is clear that military families face unique stressors that must be taken into consideration. The increasing divorce rate among military couples may be related to changes in the nature of deployments, with more frequent and longer separations from military spouses likely to result in greater stress on the marital and family systems (Riggs, 2014). Experiencing and managing these stresses impact not only individual wellbeing, but the wellbeing of relationships as well, evident in the fact that the increase in treatment of depression, anxiety, and sleep problems by primary care providers is attributable to long deployments and family separation (Mental Health Advisory Team, 2008). In addition to negotiating the stress experienced throughout the deployment, the stress of a service member's homecoming, although presumed to be a predominantly joyous occasion, can be more stressful than the separation, especially following a long separation or a separation where the service member faced very adverse living conditions (Black, 1993).

### **Impact of Deployment on Families**

Military members often travel away from their families on temporary duty assignments, lasting anywhere from several days to many weeks to extended tours of six to twelve months or more when deployed to foreign soil (Baptist et al., 2011; Riggs, 2014). In addition, on average, active duty military families move every two to three years within the United States or overseas. These relocations can affect marital

satisfaction, employment of the nonmilitary spouse, and the family's financial status (Rosen, Ickovics, & Moghadam, 1990). With each move, military spouses who work may lose opportunities for career advancement, while other spouses may become discouraged and choose to not work due to their own employment instability and role as primary caregiver for their children. The change in roles and boundary ambiguity (Boss, 1992) is a universal post-deployment phenomenon that may develop for all the family members (Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008). Service members often can feel as though their families do not understand what they experienced during war and may feel frustration over pressure to assume their former responsibilities.

The threat of additional and possibly permanent separation from an attachment figure (i.e., an irreplaceable significant other to whom one turns for comfort, emotional connection, and security) would increase the likelihood and possible severity of present-day negative emotional and behavioral reactions among all family members (Riggs & Gottlieb, 2009). The media has highlighted cases in which military members have lost custody of their children ostensibly due to extended deployments required by their military employer (Riggs, 2014). With all of these potential stressors, researchers have debated how resilient military families are to these stressors.

### **Resiliency in Military Families**

Despite frequent moves and relocations, the existing evidence suggests that military children function just as well if not better than civilian children in aspects of health, well-being, and academic achievement (Riggs, 2014). These findings support the idea that parental attitudes towards and adjustment to relocation play an influential role in children's outcomes after relocation. With frequent relocations, military families may

very well develop expert-level abilities to navigate the military moving system, packing up and moving with very short notice, and as a result demonstrate effective, problem-focused coping and perceived self-control over the moving process (Riggs, 2014).

Indeed, military families may develop unique resilience characteristics that promote positive adjustment to relocation and separation from deployed spouses or parents.

### **Lack of Resiliency in Military Families**

Canfield (2014) disagrees with Riggs (2014), stating the stressors associated with the deployment cycle are significant and can lead to depression, anxiety, and behavioral concerns for all family members including the children and partners (Canfield, 2014). A family's adaptation to these stressors can also impact the functioning of the service member during the phases of mobilization, deployment, sustainment, and reintegration. Psychological injuries, or operational stress injuries (OSIs), described as *invisible wounds* incurred through exposure to combat-related trauma, affect approximately one-third of returning service members in the United States (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). The effects spill over to the family unit.

### **Enmeshed Strategies**

Consistent with the idea that shared family belief systems promote resilience, research suggests that conveying meaning in the military member's deployment (e.g., war against terrorists, fighting for the greater good, defending the country) helps the member, spouse, and children understand the "why" of the member's deployment. In fact, clear communication about deployment and open expression of emotions regarding deployment can help soften the blow of the impending deployment and provide a supportive foundation for the organizational changes that are about to occur in the family

(Riggs, 2014). Deployment for spouses remaining at home involves four major tasks: redefining roles and division of household responsibilities, managing strong emotions, abandoning emotional constriction and creating intimacy in relationships, and creating a sense of shared meaning surrounding the deployment experience. These tasks may be the foundation for future enmeshment strategies.

## CHAPTER III

### FRAMEWORK OF MODEL AND METHODOLOGY

#### **Narrative Theory: A Condensed Overview**

This research project was approved by the Abilene Christian University Institutional Review Board and was used to protect the participants' confidentiality. Narrative research falls under the qualitative research umbrella and takes account of the relationship between individual experience and cultural context (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Subjective meanings and self-awareness rise as the stories unfold. The researcher bears in mind that stories are reconstructions of the person's experiences. The stories are remembered and told at a particular point in the storyteller's life, to a particular researcher, and for a particular purpose. This all has influence on how the stories are narrated, which stories are recounted and how they are interpreted. The stories do not represent "life as lived" but the storytellers' representations of those lives as told to the researcher. Narrative research helps to make sense of the ambiguity and complexity of human lives (Bruner, 1986). Narrative analysis treats stories as knowledge which constitutes "the social reality of the narrator" (Etherington, 2004).

The story becomes an object of study, focusing on how individuals or groups make sense of events and actions in their lives. Researchers capture the informant's story through ethnographic techniques such as observation and interviews. This method is said to be well suited to study subjectivity and the influence of culture and identity on the

human condition. Enmeshment is frowned upon because it does not align with Western values, but if the researcher analyzes why enmeshment may be needed through the use of stories of military family members, then the researcher may understand why it may be beneficial to them.

### **Grounded Theory: A Condensed Overview**

Along with narrative theory and analysis, the researcher utilized grounded theory methodology in order to gain the data needed. In 1967, Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss together developed grounded theory that revolutionized the qualitative research field. Glaser and Strauss sought to integrate qualitative methods with the systematic analysis of quantitative methods (Charmaz, 2000). Their emphasis landed on encouraging data interaction to generate a theory. However, Glaser and Strauss began to differ in their approaches to grounded theory (Hallberg, 2006).

#### **Classical Grounded Theory**

As Glaser and Strauss began to diverge in their approaches, Glaser continued their original work while Strauss began his work with Juliet Corbin. A main tenet of classical grounded theory is that a theory develops by emerging from data and has the ability to continuously develop over time. Another tenant is the belief that research on the topic should be avoided so as to not have the researcher influenced by their own preconceived notions and biases (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Additionally, classical theory has a two-stage analysis: substantive phase and theoretical phase.

#### **Straussian Grounded Theory**

As Strauss and Corbin initiated their grounded theory, they concluded that data could be integrated into the process by generating and verifying the data. Another tenant

of Straussian theory is the researcher actively listening during interviews as opposed to passively listening (Hallberg, 2006). The data analysis incorporates a three-stage coding process: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding.

### **Constructivist Grounded Theory**

Constructivist grounded theory, conceived by Kathy Charmez, is rooted in the belief that data is constructed through the interactions between the researcher and the participant (Hallberg, 2006). The theory's focus is on the process, meanings, and actions of data collection. Constructivist theory utilizes multiple interviews by the same participant and the interviews are more extensive than the previously mentioned theories. The coding process for constructivist grounded theory includes initial or open coding and refocused coding (Charmaz, 2008).

### **Current Study**

The researcher sought to understand the role of enmeshment in military families through narrative theory and Strauss and Corbin's grounded methodology. The researcher initiated the project utilizing only a narrative lens. During this time, the researcher gained knowledge of the areas through the collection of books and articles. The literature review was then written. Strauss and Corbin's grounded methodology was incorporated before data collection. The data was then analyzed utilizing open, axial, and selective coding.

### **Participants**

Narrative research is rooted in asking questions that explore how themes fit into the context and life of the participant. Questions were asked to elicit the participant's storytelling of their relationship. Participants were invited into the study via email and given the opportunity to opt out at any time. Participants were asked to email the

researcher directly for participation. The researcher asked participants the following screening questions:

- Is your partner in the military?
- How long have you been in a relationship?
- How old are you? How old is your partner?
- Has your partner deployed? If so, how many times and how long was the deployment?

If the participants did not meet certain criteria, then they were unable to participate in the study. These criteria include: the partner must be in the military; they must be in a relationship for at least five years; they and their partner must be at least eighteen years of age and less than fifty; and their partner must have deployed at least one time and the deployment must have lasted longer than three months. Prospective participants who did not meet the specifications did not qualify for participation in the study and were left out of the invitation process. The participants were interviewed via telephone and then recorded for transcription. Six participants passed through the screening questions and were interviewed. Two of those participants were enmeshed. Those two participants' data were coded and analyzed. Both participants who were enmeshed and then whose interviews were coded were Caucasian. One participant was 42 years old, and the other participant was 49 years old.

### **Data Collection**

The choice of methods was influenced by the objective of enabling participants to articulate, in their own words, how military life has impacted themselves and their family. This choice relates to the concern that historically, enmeshment was seen as a



negative homeostatic mechanism and this opens up new possibilities. The design of the research was to open up a discursive space for the participants to freely discuss the impacts that military life has had on them and their family. While the overall approach to the interview was semi-structured, the interview process followed a predominantly open-ended questioning technique. Participants were also encouraged to introduce any other topics that they felt were important to understanding their current position. Six interviews were conducted via telephone due to geographical limitations. All interviews began with the same question which asked the participants to tell the researcher the story of their relationship. As is appropriate in narrative research, the following questions were asked to elicit the participant's social reality:

- Can you tell me the story of your relationship?
- Can you walk me through your closeness in your relationship? Has it changed throughout time?
- Have you ever felt as if your closeness was intrusive?
- Do you feel as though your closeness is mutually benefiting each other?

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was also shaped by the goal of maximizing the participants' voices. Grounded theory and narrative analysis techniques were both utilized to ensure that the analytical story was situated in the collected data. Findings discussed in this thesis largely focused on the interview data. All six of the interviews were fully transcribed on the basis of conceptual richness and the presence of detail in the discussion that would add extensively to the analysis. The necessity to utilize both narrative and grounded approaches became apparent after conceptualizing the first three chapters of this thesis.

The researcher strove to understand the participants' stories in their totality and took a holistic approach to data analysis by combining the strong data analysis from grounded theory and combining it with the participants' voices.

Although narrative theory and grounded theory have not been frequently associated with each other, the emphasis in narrative theory on the meaning of symbolic systems that humans use to construct reality, such as language (Bruner, 1987, 1991, 2004) does suggest commensurability between grounded theory (via symbolic interactionism) and narrative inquiry. Language is the most common form of data collected and analyzed in both narrative inquiry and grounded theory approaches, although it is more common to restrict the focus in grounded theory studies to what is being said as opposed to how it is said and what influences how it is said.

Utilizing the narrative approach balances the grounded approach in that the researcher strives to locate theory within a participant's narrative and keep participant stories intact; whereas in grounded theory, the story becomes fragmented and some of the meaning is lost. Narrative requires the individual's story in its totality (Charmaz, 1995) within the research report. However, this approach has been critiqued as lacking in analytic depth and served only to synthesize the participant's description (Charmaz, 1995). In order to combat this, the researcher explored narrative form through grounded theory.

A narrative study consists of an interactional experience that is constantly negotiated and manipulated by both listener and speaker. Narrative is transactional and developmental; when one shares narratives with each other, insights and social knowledge evolve. This is communicative and is also a major way of disseminating

information. The narratives we call data are illustrative, linguistically, of perceived human experience. As such, their meaning is dependent on context, time, place of telling, and audience response, as well as the teller's viewpoint, coupled with the researcher's findings.

This narrative study was conducted from a Strauss and Corbin (1990) approach. The researcher in this study collected stories from military family storytellers. The data was extracted and analyzed from the stories through open, axial, and selective coding. The storytelling commenced in the interviews, which were then transcribed and analyzed. The researcher then used open coding to code the information by hand in which phrase and line-by-line coding was used along with referring to notes. The codes from each interview were then combined to form a pool of codes that was prepared for axial coding. In the axial coding process, each of the codes was analyzed and the researcher then began to identify the relationships between the codes. The pool of open codes was then categorized in axials based on their mutual commonalities. When all axial codes were created, they were prepared for selective coding. By conducting the narrative study according to the Strauss and Corbin approach, there was a greater probability that the integrity of the tales would be preserved. Subsequent questions were then asked for a follow-up or clarification of answers to the above questions. Interviews lasted around 60 minutes.

### **Protecting Confidentiality**

The researcher acknowledged that there is a risk of breach in confidentiality when conducting research. In order to protect the participants' confidentiality, several measures were taken. The researcher conducted phone interviews at the Marriage and Family

Institute on the campus of Abilene Christian University in an assigned room for confidentiality and privacy. To protect the data, the participants' personal identities were coded during data collection to maintain confidentiality. All records were stored electronically on a secure flash drive that was locked in a cabinet. The researcher also made paper copies of the transcription of each interview to initiate coding for data analysis. The coding started by hand and then was moved to an electronic document.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

#### **Grounded Theory**

The researcher first utilized Strauss and Corbin's grounded theory approach before integrating the narrative approach. The researcher used open coding to code the data, those open codes were condensed down to axial codes to find the process of the codes, they were then further condensed to two selective codes. After this grounded coding, narrative analysis was utilized.

#### **Open Codes**

Out of the six interviews, it was determined that two participants were enmeshed, and theoretical sampling was used to zero in on enmeshed military participants. Narrative analysis determined if the couples were enmeshed. The two enmeshed participants' data were then analyzed. The researcher looked for high levels of emotional closeness; how roles were defined and redefined before, during, and after deployments; if the closeness was mutually beneficial; and if there was a sense of intrusiveness to determine if the participant was enmeshed with their partner. Unlike original grounded theory, the study did not start with a blank slate or tabula rasa. The researcher started with the literature review regarding enmeshment and military families. This gave the researcher a deeper understanding of the topics and sought to explore how enmeshed military families could be healthy.

From the participants' responses, there were a total of 99 codes that were identified through the open coding process. The codes stemmed from line-by-line coding to maximize the opportunity of understanding the experience of each participant. The open codes are a culmination of all of the participants' responses. The open codes were categorized into 13 axial codes and sorted into seven themes.

### **Axial Codes**

In analyzing the data, the researcher organized the 99 codes that emerged from the open coding process and condensed them into 13 axial codes which were sorted into seven categories. The first category, causal conditions, had two themes: (1) instability due to conflicts between military and home life and (2) sense of dependability and safety. The second category, phenomenon, had one theme, enmeshment. The third category, strategies, had three themes: (1) fulfilling needs of partner, (2) redefining roles, and (3) witness unhealthy families and chose not to utilize their maladaptive coping mechanisms. The fourth category, context, has two themes: (1) enmeshment shifts during critical points of deployment stages and (2) during deployment, partners gathered strength from social circles. The fifth category, intervening conditions, has three themes: (1) fulfills need for connection and commitment, (2) makes room to reintegrate, and (3) shifts from dependence to independence due to deployments. The sixth category, action/interaction strategies, has two themes: (1) leaned on social support in order to manage frustrations and (2) fear of their family disintegrating. The seventh category, consequences, has two themes: (1) they are able to fluidly integrate the family member back into the family and the roles are easily redistributed and (2) continue to function because of their children. These axial codes were combined into selective codes in order to understand the

participant's process. Please refer to the Appendix B for the categorization of quotes to open codes to axial codes.

### **Selective Codes**

After categorizing the 99 open codes into 13 axial codes and sorting them into seven themes, two selective codes emerged from the data. The two selective codes were (1) motivations for the family unity and (2) strategies for the family unity. Please refer to Appendix C for the table.

### **Code Process**

Utilizing grounded theory data analysis enabled the researcher to answer the following research questions.

- 1) How does military life impact enmeshment levels in the family?
  - a) How does enmeshment help regulate closeness in the military family?
  - b) Is enmeshment a tool used to keep the family united?
- 2) How has their enmeshment level or level of cohesion changed before, during, and after deployments?

Open codes were condensed into axial codes. The researcher then organized them according to the seven categories: causal conditions, phenomenon, strategies, context, intervening conditions, action or interaction, and consequences. The researcher then looked at how each code interacted with the other. The instability due to conflicts between military and home life (i.e., deployments and repeated relocations and uprooting of families) pushes the family into varying degrees of enmeshment. The sense of dependability and safety encourages the cementing of safe enmeshment. The military

family's goal in creating the safe enmeshment include the fulfilling of needs in each partner. Each partner redefines the roles in the family to ensure as much stability as possible in the family. They do this during critical points of the deployment stages - pre-deployment, during deployment, and post-deployment. In order to help with imbalance of roles, partners elicit help from their social support. Witnessing unhealthy families and choosing not to utilize their maladaptive coping mechanisms is what helps shape the family's strategies for safe enmeshment. This enmeshment fulfills the partner's need for connection and strengthens their commitment to each other. The partner shifts from a dependent state pre-deployment to an independent state during deployment and back to a dependent state after deployment. These continual shifts make room for the other partner to more easily reintegrate back into the family. Partners utilize their fear of their family disintegrating to maintain closeness in the family. They also strive to utilize healthy coping skills to model dependability and safety for their children. Please refer to Figure 1 below. The seven axial categories were then further condensed to two categories for selective coding. The two themes that emerged were strategies for family unity and motivations for family unity.



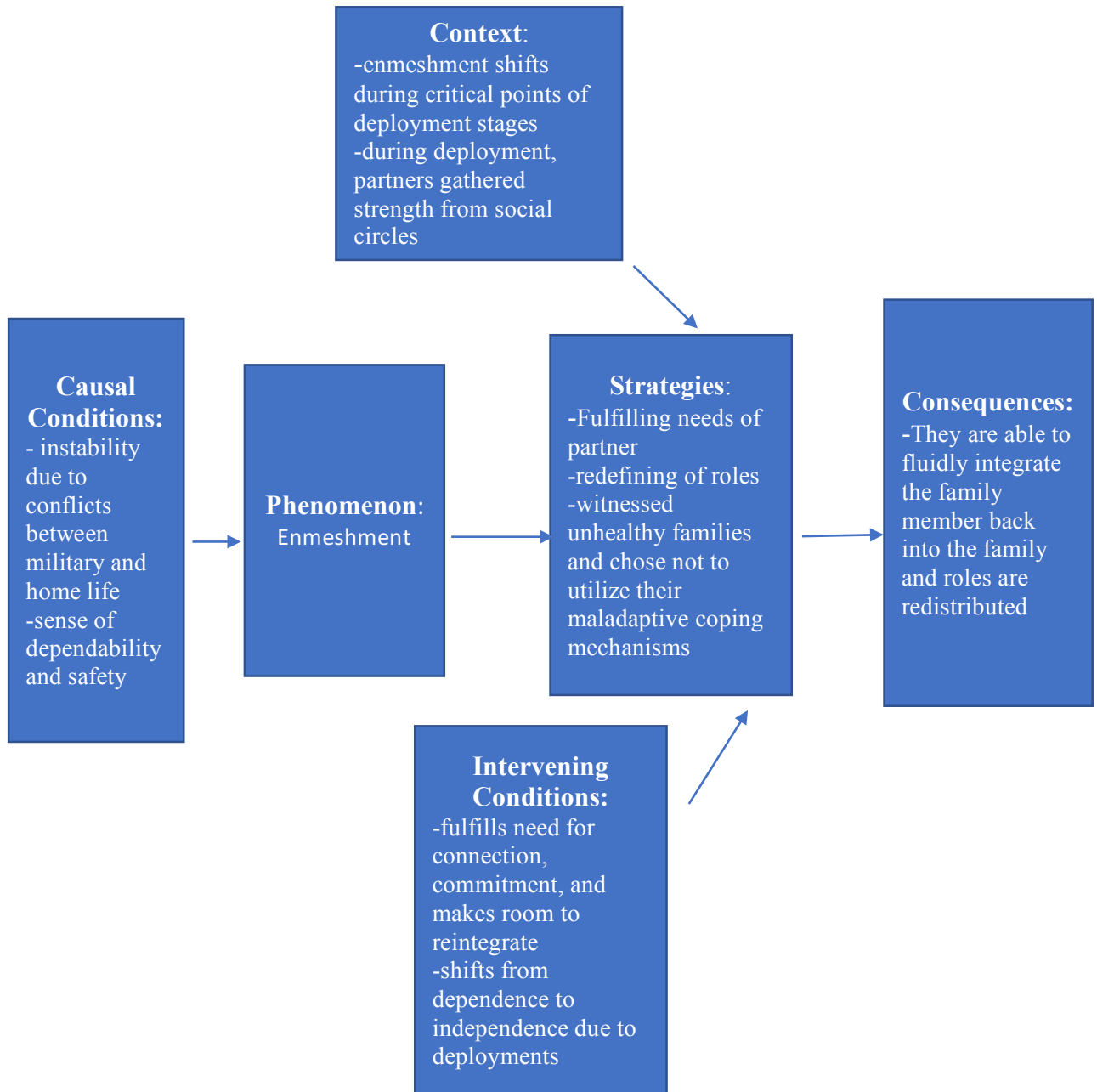


Figure 1: Code Process

The grounded theory techniques allowed the researcher to establish strategies for family unity and motivations for family unity as core analytic categories. However, it did

not facilitate full understanding of the actions and interactions within and around that concept. In order to effectively disentangle and fully understand the data, narrative analysis served as both a conceptual starting point and as a method in this research. When utilizing the narrative approach, it is possible to maintain the grounded theory technique of breaking up the data in order to establish analytic properties and then present and explicate concepts that offers evidence for assertions and ideas (Charmaz, 1995).

**Research Question 1: How does military life impact enmeshment levels in the family?**

This question laid the foundation for further inquiry. This question was further broken down into two additional questions. This question was answered by two codings: 1) instability due to conflicts between military and home life and 2) enmeshment-role and emotional inheritance.

**Instability due to conflicts between military and home life.** Military life inevitably includes deployments, constant relocations, and giving up beloved careers. The constant instability in the environments may push the partners closer together because they are the few constants in each other's lives.

**Enmeshment-role and emotional inheritance.** One participant stated that because of the constant uprooting, her career suffered. This has been a known issue in the military community for some time. She said that the relocations caused her to lose pieces of herself so then she took on more of her partner because she was "isolated from those other roots."

### **Research Question 1a: How does enmeshment help regulate closeness in the family?**

Research question “1a: How does enmeshment help regulate closeness in the family?” was answered by the two codes: 1) closeness in role redistribution and 2) sense of stability and safety.

**Closeness in role redistribution.** Participants reported that their closeness in their relationship was beneficial in several ways. They reported that because they are close to their partners, they are more easily able to reintegrate the partner back into the family and “just goes back to how it was.” One reported that she thought that her partner felt as though she was more dependable. She stated, “Going from a dual partnership to a single one brought us closer together because he knows that he can depend on me to take care of business and vice versa.”

**Sense of stability and safety.** The theme “sense of stability and safety” ties in with the theme “closeness in role redistribution.” The participant’s partner depends on the participant to “take care of business” at home. The partner trusts that the participant will manage the home and the children. The participants are aware of their closeness with their partner. Both of the participants stated that what attracted their partner to them was a feeling of safety that they received from them. The participants trust their partners enough and feel safe enough to forge close emotional bonds with their partner which facilitates safe enmeshment.

### **Research Question 1b: Is enmeshment a tool used to keep the family united?**

Research question “1b: Is enmeshment a tool used to keep the family united?” was answered by the three codes: 1) fulfills need for connection, commitment, and makes

room to reintegrate, 2) witness unhealthy families and chose not to utilize their maladaptive coping mechanisms, and 3) fear of their family disintegrating.

**Fulfills need for connection, commitment, and makes room to reintegrate.**

The participants utilized rituals for connection before and after deployments. One participant said, “We usually go on a little trip or something before he leaves.” The participants and their partners elicited various types of conversations that helped to enable safe enmeshment. They both stated that the way in which their partner communicated with them was an attraction for them. The participants were able to fluidly integrate the family member back into the family.

**Witnessed unhealthy families and chose not to utilize their maladaptive coping mechanisms.** For both participants, maladaptive coping strategies were modeled for them from other military families. One participant stated, “I have seen too many families broken apart because of deployments and I never had that fear with [husband]”. In their relationship journey, they have chosen to not inherit those strategies into their relationship with the partner. This theme leads to the next theme “fear of their family disintegrating.”

**Fear of their family disintegrating.** Because both of the partners witnessed negative homeostatic mechanism that fractured families, they consciously chose not to incorporate some of those strategies. One of the participants said, “I have seen too many families broken apart because of deployments.” One participant discussed how her partner’s parents were still together. “I have dated people who come from divorced families, but his parents were still married, and he came from these generations of families that worked, worked out their problems . . . they were golden people, just

golden.” This participant has seen unhealthy military families and strove to have a relationship and family like her partner’s family.

**Research Question 2: How has their enmeshment level or level of cohesion changed before, during, and after deployments?**

Research question “2: How has their enmeshment level or level of cohesion changed before, during, and after deployments?” was answered by the three codes: 1) shifts from dependence to independence during deployments, 2) during deployment, partners gathered strength from social support, and 3) fulfilling needs of partner.

**Shifts from dependence to independence during deployments.** During pre-deployment, one participant’s partner ensured to take care of his household duties before leaving and set up his power of attorney. The participant said, “He always makes sure that everything is taken care of at home so that all I have to worry about is paying the bills.” The participant also stated that emotions were openly and freely expressed. Another participant reported that during deployments, she was used to having him physically near her, but she fell into a routine because “you’re trying to do stuff for yourself” which she said helped throughout the departure. The participants expressed that the responsibilities shifted from a dual partnership to a single partnership.

**During deployment, partners gathered strength from social support.** During the deployment, the participants stated that they leaned on their social support in order to manage frustrations. Instead of going to their partner, they now have to break dependence from them and find their support elsewhere. They found support in neighbors, family, other military spouses, and counselors.

**Fulfilling needs of partner.** Post-deployment is a critical time for the couple and family. In order to complete the fusion of partners, one of the participants said that she and her partner would go on trips right after deployment. This was her ritual for connection. The participants acknowledged that the first week was an adjustment period, but after they adapted, they reported that everything went back to the way that it was. One of the participants said that her partner was supportive of her goals and saw themselves as a power couple.

### **Narrative Analysis**

A central feature of the participant's stories was what initially attracted them to their partner: dependability, safety, and communication. The researcher saw how these three traits played out in their relationships with their partners. These characteristics are interwoven through their stories and acted as the glue that held the relationship together.

Both participants coincidentally had a courting period that was less than six months and then they got engaged. The researcher was curious about this short courtship and thought that this impulsiveness played a part in the beginning of their relationship. It may be possible that the participants became used to instability early on in the relationship and had to adjust according to the needs of their partner. The researcher contemplated that because of the participant's sense of their partner's dependability and safety through the instability, it enabled them to facilitate resiliency early on in the relationship. This may have acted as a grooming for the upcoming instability in deployments to come. Throughout all of their relationship, they reported that they have had great communication and felt as though they could rely on their partner.

A topic that was highlighted by the researcher was that Participant 1 reported that her parents were divorced and that she did not want to go down the path of divorce. She said that one thing that attracted her partner to her was that his parents were still happily married, and she relied on that model of marriage. This enabled her to make conscious decisions to not incorporate some of her parents' dysfunctional patterns in her current relationship and probably is what turned her to someone who was dependable, safe, and had healthy ways of communicating.

Both of the participants discussed that relocating was an inevitable part of the military life. Change was a constant. Participant 1 discussed how independent she was prior to the indoctrination of military life. She stated that she had her emotions contained and that it was her husband who "was the one who was very emotionally open and bonded quickly." She recalls that when they were both working in their master's programs, "being a power couple and supporting one another's goals" was what encouraged her to be closer to him.

They both have rituals for connection before and after deployment. One of them has a ritual to go to a vacation place or vacation spot after deployment. Participant 2's ritual is for her husband to "take care of everything beforehand." This entails fixing things around the house and power of attorney details. This feeds into attraction of that safe and dependable person that has clear and open communication.

Both of the participants discussed how they shifted from dependent in the relationship before deployments to independent when the other partner deployed back to dependent when the partner returned. They both discussed a redefining of roles at each of the stages in the process. They both stated that initially, there was some instability. The

other partner is trying to understand where they fit in the relationship and in the household. However, one of them stated that after a week, it goes back to how it was before the deployment. This dependability and trust in their partner is not one sided. Participant 2 stated, “Going from a dual partnership to a single one brought us closer together because he knows that he can depend on me to take care of business and vice versa.”

One common theme that was brought up in the interviews was witnessing other military families disintegrate because of the instability in the relationship and household. They both mentioned not wanting to go down that path and made conscious decisions to not inherit negative homeostatic mechanisms. Participant 2 stated, “I have seen too many families broken apart because of deployments and I never had that fear with [my husband].” For another participant, it appears as though she has been training for this even in childhood. As previously stated, she was raised in a divorced household and she recognized that she did not want to utilize some of the maladaptive behaviors that were modeled by her parents. She recognized similar maladaptive behaviors in other military couples and, again, chose not to utilize them in her relationship.

The researcher was curious about the intrusiveness in their relationship and if they felt as though their partner was intruding on their boundaries or vice versa as this may be a sign of unhealthy enmeshment. Participant 2 said that she has never felt as if he was intrusive or vice versa. Participant 1 stated that she has definitely felt as though some of her boundaries have been crossed and that she has felt intruded upon. This began the part two of Participant 1’s enmeshment narrative and the end of the Participant 2’s narrative.



It would be unethical for the researcher to end this story here knowing that there is more to the story that could potentially negate the safe enmeshment narrative discussed above. However, it appears as though there are two different points of enmeshment to the participants' story. There was the enmeshment that was discussed previously in the thesis and the enmeshment that occurred after her partner had repeated traumatic brain injuries (TBI) from the repeated bomb blasts from deployments. TBI affected him in a number of ways, as is common in TBI. There were points when her partner relied on her to "be his emotional filter" because he would have unpredictable emotions. Enmeshment was needed during this time because she was a caregiver for his recovery. During this time, it was not mutually beneficial, and she felt as though it was intrusive. This is not safe or healthy enmeshment. When she felt as though it was time for her to differentiate out of the caregiving role, there was a power struggle. She also did not believe that closeness in the relationship was mutually beneficial. This second enmeshment narrative supports the research on limits on enmeshment.

Due to the extenuating circumstances of Participant 1's partner, she had two different stages of enmeshment. The second stage appears to be an unhealthy and unsafe stage of enmeshment. However, the first stage prior to the extenuating circumstance appears to be safe and healthy. It also mirrors the safe and healthy enmeshment in Participant 2's relationship. Closeness was a tool used to fluidly integrate the partner back into the family. Their closeness was mutually beneficial and was not intrusive prior to TBI. This falls in line with the research regarding healthy enmeshment.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

#### **Discussion**

Historically, enmeshment has been seen as a dysfunctional couple and family pattern. However, new research has emerged from culturally competent researchers who have found that diverse or collectivistic cultures have found stability and strength in their enmeshment. From the results gained from this study, one can conclude that military families can experience variations of enmeshment that can be healthy and safe. There can be extenuating circumstances that push enmeshment from a healthy and safe area to an unhealthy area as demonstrated by Participant 1. However, prior to those circumstances, the couple experienced healthy enmeshment. One reason that it may be healthy as opposed to maladaptive is because the military culture is a collectivistic culture. It satisfies four main areas of collectivistic cultures. Their social rules focus on promoting selflessness, they work in teams and groups, families and communities play a central role, and they carry a mentality of acting on the interest of the group as opposed to the individual. This aligns with other culturally appreciative research that found strength in enmeshment.

#### **Limitations**

There were a few limitations to this study including a small sample size. Six individuals who had partners in the military were interviewed; however, two of them were enmeshed and those two interviews were coded. There was also a lack of

perspectives from the other partner and there were also only female participants. The study also failed to reach saturation.

### **Contribution to the Literature**

This study sought to fill the gap in the literature in regard to enmeshment and military families. There is research in military families and some research regarding military families. However, there is very little research in regard to military families or couples and enmeshment. There is also not an abundance of research in regard to healthy enmeshment. The findings in this study are consistent with other research in regard to how enmeshment can be a healthy tool used. Although other cultures utilize enmeshment for purposes other than to keep the family together, the common theme is the collectivistic nature of the cultures that utilize this strategy. There are disparities between research that analyzes collectivistic cultures and enmeshment and research that analyzes individualist cultures and enmeshment. Researchers analyzing individualist cultures believe that enmeshment is a negative homeostatic mechanism. Researchers analyzing collectivistic cultures believe that enmeshment is a healthy and natural process. According to research, both are accurate. However, researchers, family therapists, practitioners, and educators should be more cognizant of the cultural relativism of enmeshment when working with diverse cultures.

### **Contributions to the Mental Health Field**

It is crucial that mental health workers be knowledgeable of and sensitive to the culturally sanctioned aspects of diverse family life. This study's results are meant to enhance the beliefs and works of mental health practitioners. From a structural standpoint, enmeshment is viewed as a predictor of maladjustment. It is assumed that

enmeshed couples and families are unbalanced and have high anxiety and depression. Although this can be true for individualistic cultures, it is not true for other diverse cultures. It is also especially important for family professionals to recognize that strength and resilience can be found in military couples and families that have previously labeled dysfunctional in couple and family theory. Therefore, enmeshment in military families should not be readily labeled dysfunctional but should be looked at cross-culturally. By looking through this culturally sensitive lens, the viewer will see strength and resilience previously unseen.

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APPENDIX A  
IRB Approval Letter

ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

*Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World*

Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103  
325-674-2885



August 27, 2018

Alexus Hamilton  
Department of Marriage and Family Studies  
Box 29446 Abilene Christian University

Dear Alexis,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "Enmeshment in Military Families"

(IRB# 18-054 ) is exempt from review under Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects.

If at any time the details of this project change, please resubmit to the IRB so the committee can determine whether or not the exempt status is still applicable.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

*Megan Roth*

Megan Roth, Ph.D.  
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

## APPENDIX B

### Breakdown of Codes

Axial Codes	Open Codes	Quotes from Open Codes
<p>Instability due to conflicts between military and home life</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deployments</li> <li>• Short courtship</li> <li>• Sudden proposals</li> <li>• Constant relocations</li> <li>• Giving up beloved career</li> </ul>	<p>“So for 6 months, we would fly back and forth... He said by the way- you wanna get- will you marry me”; “we moved every two years”; “we’re uprooted so often and I’m losing my career”</p>
<p>Sense of dependability and safety</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Upon meeting, he appeared safe</li> <li>• Partner showed seriousness of marriage</li> </ul>	<p>“He looked like he was just real interesting to talk to and looked safe”; “I’m not gonna do this [marriage] unless you’re serious and he did show me he was”</p>
<p>Enmeshment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Role and emotional inheritance</li> </ul>	<p>“take on more of each other”; “I’m taking on his</p>

		functionality in the family”
Fulfilling needs of partner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Became a power couple</li> <li>• Mutually supportive of goals</li> </ul>	“I come from a much more empowered, liberal community”; “we were both working on our Master’s degrees”; “we were really good at supporting one another’s goals”
Redefining of roles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shift to dual parenting roles</li> <li>• Household responsibilities shifted</li> </ul>	“you’re not a two-parent family anymore”; “he comes back and he forgets that you have been doing everything the past nine months”
Witnessed unhealthy families and chose not to utilize their maladaptive coping mechanisms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Parents are divorced</li> <li>• Fragmented families due to deployments</li> </ul>	“I have seen too many families broken apart because of deployments and I never had that fear with [husband]”; “without trust and dependability, there’s no way it would



		work”; “my parents were divorced”
Enmeshment shifts during critical points of deployment stages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Partners shifted from independent to during and after</li> </ul>	<p>“Three months in [to deployment] you get into a routine... you’re trying to do stuff for yourself”;</p> <p>“He’ll find all the stuff that I didn’t fix in the house</p>
During deployment, partners gathered strength from social circles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Leaned on social support in order to manage frustrations</li> <li>Neighbors became family</li> </ul>	<p>“I try and talk to friends”;</p> <p>“I have military spouse friends that are going thorough it as well and so I try to communicate to them”;</p> <p>“I met a lot of my neighbors and they became really good friends with me... they became kind of like my family away from home”</p>
Fulfills need for connection, commitment,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Rituals for connection</li> <li>Good conversation</li> </ul>	<p>“we usually go on a little trip or something before he leaves”;</p> <p>“we talk about</p>

<p>and makes room to reintegrate</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Deeper sense of commitment</li> <li>• They are able to fluidly integrate the family member back into the family</li> <li>• The roles are easily redistributed</li> </ul>	<p>everything, that was like a big thing for me”; “quickly goes back to the way that it was [before deployment]”; “I’m not gonna do this unless you’re serious and he did show he was”</p>
<p>Shifts from dependence to independence during deployments</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partner takes care of household, bills, etc. before deployment</li> <li>•</li> </ul>	<p>“He always makes sure everything is taken care of at home”; “you’re not two parents, you’re one.”</p>
<p>Fear of their family disintegrating</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Witnessed fractured families</li> <li>• Was modeled healthy family patterns</li> </ul>	<p>“I have seen too many families broken apart because of deployments”; “I have dated people who come from divorced families, but his parents were still married, and he came from these generations of families that worked, worked out their problems... they</p>

		were golden people, just golden”
They are able to fluidly integrate the family member back into the family and roles are easily redistributed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Closeness in role redistribution</li> </ul>	“Going from a dual partnership to a single one brought us closer together because he knows that he can depend on me to take care of business and vice versa”

## APPENDIX C

### Axial and Selective Codes Table

Strategies for Family Unity	Motivations for Family Unity
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instability due to conflicts between military and home life</li> <li>• Redefining of roles</li> <li>• Enmeshment shifts during critical points of deployment stages</li> <li>• Shifts from dependence to independence due to deployments</li> <li>• They are able to fluidly integrate the family member back into the family and roles are easily redistributed</li> <li>• Leaned on social support in order to manage frustrations</li> <li>• During deployment, partners gathered strength from social circles</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sense of dependability and safety</li> <li>• Fulfilling needs of partner</li> <li>• Fulfills need for connection, commitment, and makes room to reintegrate</li> <li>• Continue to function because of the kids</li> <li>• Witnessed unhealthy families and chose not to utilize their maladaptive coping mechanisms</li> <li>• Fear of their family disintegrating</li> </ul>