

# 23 The Resilience of Military Families

## *Theoretical Perspectives*

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Since 2001, more than 2 million service men and women have been deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq and by the end of 2010, combat deployments had resulted in some 5,500 service member deaths and more than 37,000 serious injuries. Paralleling these operational casualties, our military forces have also experienced a large number of stress-related casualties, including service members demonstrating post-traumatic stress symptoms, as well as evidence of depression, anxiety disorders, substance abuse, and suicidal behaviors. For some service members, these symptoms actually emerge after their return home from the war zone and/or after their return to civilian life (AFHSC, 2010; Institute of Medicine, 2010).

Service members do not face problems alone—the majority are married, others are involved in serious romantic relationships, approximately two in five have children in the household, and almost all are part of an extended family (ICF International, 2010). In effect, families also “serve and sacrifice” because all family members are profoundly affected by military service and military family life, especially wartime separations and the physical, emotional, and social sequelae of war that often persists well beyond the service member’s homecoming (Institute of Medicine, 2010).

Behavioral and social scientists have made significant efforts to understand variations in the responses of military families to the many challenges posed by military service, including the adversities associated with wartime service (MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010). The concept of resilience is often used to describe those families that successfully adapt over time in the face of significant adversities and continue to get the day-to-day tasks of life done (e.g., bills paid, children to school, dog fed, and so forth; Bowen & Martin, 2011).

This chapter addresses military family resilience in today’s Active and Reserve Components—the US Armed Forces that emerged from the 1990s and a period of profound and stressful downsizing (in the overall number of military bases, units, and people) and were thrown into an unexpected decade of war. Our focus is on married service members with and without dependent children in the home as well as single service members with dependent children in the home. In addition, we focus on the resilience of the family as a group. In agreement with Patterson (2002), this requires a shift in the unit of analysis from the individual to a system level that involves two or more family members.

We review three theories that provide perspectives on the capacity of military families (defined here as Afghanistan and Iraq War era military families) to demonstrate resilience. The first two theories are larger conceptual frameworks in the field of family studies: *life course theory* (sometimes referred to as life course perspective) and *symbolic interactionism*. The third, *family stress theory*, emerged directly from the study of military families in crisis (e.g., Hill, 1949). We examine how each theory addresses one or more of the four dimensions that Hawley and DeHaan (1996)

associate with variation in the capacity of families to demonstrate resilience: “context, developmental level, the interactive combination of risk and protective factors, and the family’s shared outlook” (p. 293). Limitations in the application of these perspectives are discussed, in particular, the lack of attention to the broader community context. We then offer a theory of community action and change, which effectively examines military family resilience in the context of the formal and informal community networks in which military families are embedded. This community perspective shifts the focus to include larger contextual effects that frame and inform military family resilience.

## KEY ISSUES IN THE STUDY OF MILITARY FAMILY RESILIENCE

We begin by discussing both military demands and stressors and marital and family outcomes. This is followed by a discussion of the concept of resilience—a brief history of the concept and its current use in the family studies literature.

### MILITARY DEMANDS AND STRESSORS

America’s military is an all-volunteer force (AVF)—well-educated, well-trained, well-equipped, well-led, and proud of its professional warrior identity and service to the nation. Our Armed Forces are built around a small Active Component force and a readily available National Guard and other Reserve Components, designed and intended to perform global military missions across a spectrum from warfighting to humanitarian operations.

Because of its small size and the challenges of simultaneously conducting two prolonged, major combat operations during the first decade of the twenty-first century, America’s Armed Forces have been severely stressed—including an unprecedented mobilization of the National Guard and other Reserve Components (Hoge, et al., 2004). Meeting the combat and other operational challenges in Afghanistan and Iraq, while maintaining an array of ongoing, worldwide military missions, have required many Active and Reserve Component military members (especially Soldiers and Marines) to serve multiple combat deployments with limited recovery time at home between these deployments. To a lesser extent, Active and Reserve Air Force and Navy personnel have also been deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq often as “filler” personnel (medical, logistical, communications, transportation, civil affairs, and other military specialties) to support the Army and Marine Corps. At the same time, Air Force and Navy units have experienced an increase in operational tempo associated with sustaining America’s global military presence. Examples of these missions include the co-occurring air and sea-based combat and humanitarian engagements in Libya and the massive humanitarian aid provided in response to the earthquake in Haiti and the multiple disasters in Japan.

Like other segments of society, the Armed Forces contain a diverse array of family types whose membership and structure often place added stress on family life (Department of Defense, 2009). These family types include single parent families, dual military career couples, as well as a significant number of military families where there is a child or adult in the family with a special need. Many military spouses are also in the civilian workforce, often because of economic necessity.

As Segal (1989) first described them, the family and the military are both “greedy institutions” demanding much of their members. From the perspective of today’s military family, especially non-traditional families, the challenges of military life are increasingly complex and the duty demands of current military service cause many of these families to feel overwhelmed. Although military duties and service life have always been stressful, the pace, intensity, and dangers associated with today’s operational requirements, place a particularly heavy load on military families (Chandra, Burns, Tanielian, & Jaycox, 2011). As noted more than 20 years ago by Bowen and Orthner (1989), military families are a type of “organization family”—families where the needs of the employing organization usually take priority over the needs of the family.

### MARITAL AND FAMILY OUTCOMES

Despite the challenges of a demanding military lifestyle, most military families do well and many military families thrive, often benefiting from positive life experiences like those associated with living and traveling overseas (Martin & Sherman, 2009). Most military families also experience a personal satisfaction and feel a sense of pride that typically comes with awareness that the service and sacrifice associated with being a military family are important and valued.

For some military members and their families, however, the service member is not able to successfully complete his or her military service obligation or the spouse may not be willing to continue in the marriage and remain in military life (Martin & Sherman, 2012). Although the military divorce rate has been relatively steady even in this current wartime period, about 3% per year, there is obvious stress on military marriages associated with this challenging lifestyle, especially for those families in both the Active and Reserve Components who have experienced the frequent, often lengthy, and always dangerous combat deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq (Karney & Crown, 2007).

The adversities and challenges faced by families during wartime may also have negative repercussions on the nature of the parent-child relationship, as well as child and adolescent adjustment. For example, each stage of deployment may present challenges for military children and adolescents, as evidenced in their lower academic performance and elevated risk for mental health problems (Chandra, et al., 2011; Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass, 2007). The impacts of military service may also influence the child or adolescent directly or indirectly through increasing problems in the marital relationship (Dekel & Monson, 2010; Sheppard, Malatras, & Israel, 2010).

In recognition of these many wartime challenges, DOD and the military services have made considerable efforts to provide couples and families with primary, secondary, and tertiary support to enrich, sustain, and support marriages and family life (Institute of Medicine, 2010). While many of the stressors associated with military duties and military life are not new, the challenges of today's wartime military service, including lengthy, repeated combat deployments and the associated family separations, represent unprecedented threats to the integrity and well-being of service members and their families. Stress is cumulative, and the demands currently being made on our all-volunteer military and their family members are not likely to substantially lessen in the foreseeable future.

### THE CONCEPT OF RESILIENCE

Many men and women in the Armed Forces overcome war-related trauma and disabling physical and psychological wounds and return to productive roles in both the military and the larger society. In other words, they demonstrate resilience.

The concept of resilience first appeared in the developmental psychopathology literature in the 1980s and was used to describe children and adolescents who evidenced normal developmental trajectories despite facing significant individual and/or environmental adversities. The work of Norman Garmezy, Suniya Luthar, Ann Masten, Sir Michael Rutter, and Emmy Werner is representative of this literature. In part, the concept of resilience arose to replace the misleading idea in the literature that some children were "invulnerable" to the consequences of adversities in their lives (*cf.* Earvolino-Ramirez, 2007).

The concept of resilience can be applied to individuals, dyads, families, groups, communities, and even larger units of analysis (Bowen & Martin, 2011). In each case, the central question remains the same: What distinguishes those who are able to avoid or overcome the potential negative effects of adversity over time (successful adaptation) from those who are not? Addressing this question involves unpacking the concept of resilience in the context of current literature, as well as introducing several additional concepts to this discussion (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010).

First, resilience is evaluated in the context of adversity that is associated with an increased probability of negative outcomes. Second, the determination of resilience requires a longitudinal perspective with at least three time periods: (1) a baseline period before the adversity appears; (2) the time period during and immediately following the adversity; and (3) the longer-term time period for monitoring the response trajectory, which can range from days to decades (*cf.* Werner & Smith, 1992). Thus, resilience refers to a “dynamic process” rather than a trait, state, or a particular outcome (Luthar, et al., 2000, p. 543). Third, the overcoming of adversity requires some evaluative or normative point of comparison (Bowen & Martin, 2011). For example, what is positive adjustment or competence and how does the floor of adjustment or competence vary for individuals and groups across time and situations? Reiss and Oliveri (1991) describe how the larger social community shapes an understanding of both the seriousness of a stressor event and the expected competence when confronted with the stressor event.

In addition to the concepts of adversity, time, and a normative point of comparison, assets play a critical role in models of risk and resilience. Assets are internal strengths and resources that reside within the individual or group and the nature of opportunities and supports within the environment (Bowen & Martin, 2011). Building on the work of L’Abate (1990), who defines “personal and interpersonal competence” by what a person “is, does, and has” (p. 258), we have defined three sets of assets: (a) *Being*, (b) *Having*, and (c) *Doing* (Bowen & Martin, 2011). *Being* assets involve innate individual attributes anchored in genetics, such as intelligence, personality, and physical abilities, which are enhanced by life experiences. *Having* assets involve the possession of financial capital, the availability of opportunities, and the presence of social connections, including both formal and informal support systems. *Doing* assets involve behavioral competencies that reflect specific knowledge, training, and skills at both the individual and the group level.

Whatever the type, assets function in at least one of three ways in the relationship between adversity (risk) and outcomes. Assets may decrease the occurrence or the intensity of adversity (prevent), increase the probability of positive outcomes (promote), or buffer the negative influence of adversity on outcomes (protect). Bowen (1998), in examining the relationship between work spillover and family adaptation in the US Army, demonstrated that the asset of unit leadership support functioned in all three ways. It is also important to note that we do not assume a one-to-one correspondence between assets and resiliency outcomes, either directly or indirectly. Upper and lower threshold points may be present where the relationship between particular assets and specified outcome shifts more dramatically (Crane, 1991).

McCubbin and McCubbin and their colleagues, as part of the Family Stress, Coping and Health Project at the University of Wisconsin, played an instrumental role in introducing the idea of resilient families into the discipline of family studies (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1988). They equated the study of resilient families to “the search for characteristics, dimensions, and properties of families which help families to be resistant to disruption in the face of change and adaptive in the face of crisis situations” (1988, p. 247). McCubbin and McCubbin’s definition of family resilience raised an important question in the literature about whether family resilience referred to the capacity of the family, as inferred from their definition, or to a process of adjustment and adaptation (*cf.* Patterson, 2002).

An important contribution in the study of family resilience from our perspective appeared in an article published by Hawley and DeHaan (1996). In addition to providing an excellent historical review of the concept of family resilience, as well as discussing its conceptual mooring in the study of individual resilience, the authors posed an important conceptual question: “Is resilience mutually constructed and shared by the family as a whole, or is it a collective of individual resiliencies exhibited by family members?” (p. 290). In other words, as the authors posed, “is there a basis for believing that families as units can exhibit resiliency?” (p. 5). The authors concluded that resilience as a family-level construct had theoretical promise, although they noted the challenges in measuring and assessing this construct.

Drawing upon both the individual and family resilience literatures, Hawley and DeHaan offered the following definition:

Family resilience describes the path a family follows as it adapts and prospers in the face of stress, both in the present and over time. Resilient families respond positively to these conditions in unique ways, depending on the context, developmental level, the interactive combination of risk and protective factors, and the family's shared outlook. (p. 293)

This definition of family resilience generally aligns with other definitions in the literature (Boss, 2002; Conger & Conger, 2002; Patterson, 2002; Walsh, 1996). Consequently, we use Hawley and DeHaan's definition to anchor our review, although we acknowledge that definitional ambiguity and confusion remain in the literature with family resilience also defined as a characteristic, capacity, and as an outcome (*cf.* Ganong & Coleman, 2002).

In the next section, we consider family theories that address one or more dimensions that Hawley and DeHaan associate with variation in the ability of families to demonstrate resilience: "context, developmental level, the interactive combination of risk and protective factors, and the family's shared outlook" (p. 293). This approach is consistent with what Walsh (1996) describes as the focus on family resilience: "to identify and foster key processes that enable families to cope more effectively and emerge hardier from crises or persistent stresses, whether from within or from outside the family" (p. 263).

## THEORIES OF RESILIENCE IN MILITARY FAMILIES

We focus on three theories that contribute to our understanding of military family resilience: life course theory, symbolic interactionism, and family stress theory. Several additional theories have implications for the study of military family resilience, such as systems theory, bioecological theory, and family development theory, that are often discussed in the context of these three theories (*cf.* Walsh, 1996). However, aspects of these theories that address process, context, and development are included in our discussions. Although we do not discuss theories addressing particular genetic or hereditary influences, such as the stress-diathesis model, we acknowledge that these theories offer future promise to the study of military family resilience (Bowen & Martin, 2011).

### LIFE COURSE THEORY

Interest in the life course as a theoretical approach for understanding both micro- and macro-aspects of human development across time emerged in the latter decades of the twentieth century particularly in sociology and psychology (Bengtson & Allen, 1993; Elder & Shanahan, 2006; George, 2003). Early interest focused primarily on what has been described as culturally and normatively constructed life stages and age roles, biographical meanings, the aging processes, outcomes of institutional regulations and policies, and demographic accounts of individual and collective lives (Mayer, 2009). Today, life course theory (LCT) continues to evolve within and across the social sciences and reflects emerging efforts to integrate the physical, psychological, and social mechanisms that underlie human development with the individual, meso-, and macro-level contexts that frame human development (Mayer).

LCT is particularly pertinent to two of the four dimensions that Hawley and DeHaan associate with family resilience: context and developmental level. The dimension of risk (e.g., life events) and protective factors (e.g., social supports), is also effectively captured by LCT, as described below. The theory is perhaps least applicable to the dimension of the family's shared outlook, although the family was the focus of analysis in early life course studies during the period of the Great Depression (e.g., Angell, 1936; Cavan & Ranck, 1938).

The life course paradigm (represented here in the context of military service and principally by the writings of Glen Elder) is grounded in the assumption that earlier and ongoing life experiences help to shape both our life journey and the life outcomes we experience at any point in time. Important concepts anchoring this paradigm are life trajectories (the major life paths that comprise our life experience) and life transitions (important life events that in some way alter our life path) that are embedded in these trajectories. For example a military member's service experience would be identified as a career trajectory and a promotion in rank as a transition. The timing and sequencing associated with any transition is also considered important in understanding the effects of the transition across the life course, including consideration of any single transition in the context of other trajectories and transitions. For example, the same period in a military career when one may be moving into a higher leadership position (promotion in rank) may be occurring at a time when one is also taking on important family obligations like the birth of a child. If a single recruit becomes pregnant during basic training, the family life trajectory is thrown out of sync with the military life trajectory—the timing and sequencing of transitions on each life trajectory (family life, education, and career) have implications for the others; each is informed by normative considerations that provide guidelines and standards for social comparison. The timing and sequencing of these various life transitions are important in understanding their impact on subsequent life course outcomes.

According to Gade (1991), it is necessary to locate an individual in three related time dimensions: historical time (what is occurring in the macro-environment), family time (important family developmental stages and events), and individual time (a biopsychosocial dimension). For today's military family, this means understanding what it means to be in an all-volunteer military and serving during a period of prolonged war with multiple deployments and possible combat exposures. It means understanding how these conditions influence and interact with personal, marital, and family relationships and other normative life events, as well as having an appreciation for the personal and family biopsychosocial factors that are the fabric for this paradigm and serve as the catalyst for associated life course outcomes. Elder (1990) observed that "the study of human lives in a changing society must relate the micro experience of lives and the macro level of institutions and structures" (p. 240).

Related life course concepts that have been applied to the topic of military family resilience include: "(a) human agency, (b) location in time and place, (c) timing, (d) linked lives, and (e) life-long development" (MacLean & Elder, 2007, p. 177). These concepts, and the application of LCT, provide a unique perspective for understanding the military family and nature of military service in larger sociohistorical context. For example, the response by citizens and the media to the veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq is quite different from the response received by an earlier generation of Vietnam War veterans. Clearly, the nature of this sociohistorical context plays an important role in the ability of military families to demonstrate resilience and to sustain resilience across time and life experiences.

LCT has been used to explain some of the long-term effects of military service (MacLean & Elder, 2007). Another broad area of military interest for life course research has been the long-term effects of specific events and experiences, in particular combat exposure and its immediate and long-term physical and behavioral health implications, as well as other life adjustment implications across various life stages (Elder, 1987; Elder & Clipp, 1989; Elder, Gimbel, & Ivie, 1991; Gimbel & Booth, 1994; Little & Friedlander, 1979; Pavalko & Elder, 1990).

A core concept incorporated here flows from the earlier mentioned life course description of "linked lives" and is represented in the related concept of "social convoys" across the life course (Kahn & Antonucci 1980). Kahn and Antonucci developed the *convoy model* to provide a developmental and life-span perspective on what was at the time a new concept of interpersonal relationships. The term *convoy* was originally used by Kahn and Antonucci to incorporate the perspectives of attachment, social roles, and social support within a lifespan perspective and to describe a hierarchy of relationships within personal networks, based on emotional closeness in the relationship. The concept of a *convoy* is used here to highlight the dynamic aspects of our relationships, taking

account of qualitative changes at the level of the individual, the couple, or family, as well as our larger network of family, friends, colleagues, and acquaintances.

In the present context, the concept of a convoy of social relationships is a powerful metaphor—for both the military member and for the military family. It is a metaphor that has application within a LCT framework applied to military members in which unit-based, “buddy” relationships established and defined by shared combat experiences typically become life-long relationships that have a meaning like no other. While less recognized, spouse and family relationships forged in the shared experiences and stress of military life frequently become life-long connections as well, connections that are maintained even as individual and family life trajectories evolve as families transition from military to civilian life.

### SYMBOLIC INTERACTIONISM

Symbolic interaction (SI) explores how individuals and families construct their worlds and determine what their experiences mean, accounts for how families adjust and adapt, and the processes and mechanisms they employ in doing so. Consequently, SI is highly applicable to addressing the “family’s shared outlook” dimension identified by Hawley and DeHaan (1996). SI also speaks to the importance of “context” in Hawley and DeHaan’s discussion of resilience, as social norms, reference groups, and ongoing intra- and extra-familial patterns of interaction influence how family members and families define presenting situations.

SI theory has a long history of use in family science (see Burr, Leigh, Day, & Constantine, 1979; LaRossa & Rietzes, 1993). In this approach interpretation intervenes between what might be considered an objective event and the experienced event. Thus, from an SI perspective, humans are assumed to be actors in their physical and social worlds, and not solely reactors.

*Meaning* is a central concept in SI theory, because it is the significance or importance that individuals and families attach to their experience that form the basis of actions they take (Blumer, 1969; Manis & Meltzer, 1972). Hawley and DeHaan (1996) note the critical role that meaning plays in understanding resilience through the concept of family ethos: “a shared set of values and attitudes held by a family unit that serves as the linchpin of its resilience” (p. 290).

Social relationships provide an important context for how individuals and families define and respond to presenting situations and circumstances. Whether it is the formation of opinions, deciding a course of action, or determining that a circumstance or experience is normal and tolerable, stressful and manageable, or significant and leading to crisis, social interaction has an important place. People in our lives have been referred to as “orientational others” by Kuhn (1972), and reference group is another term often used to describe collections of people who have some say in the sense we make of our lives; a reference group may be friends, family members, work associates, or a community (Shibutani, 1986).

A significant term that comes into play when describing SI is the *definition of the situation* (Thomas & Znaniecki, 1918). According to these early symbolic interactionists, if a situation is defined as real by a family then it is real in its consequences, that is, what a family does next. Intertwined with the establishment of meaning is this process of weighing, examining, and evaluating what is occurring and its significance. In the mix of this defining process is the social environment, that is, people (family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, officials, supervisors, leaders, and so on) with whom individuals and families interact. Defining situations involves learning how to navigate the social and cultural world early in life, as well as learning to deal with specific situations (for example, whether an event is considered a change that a person must cope with, or a crisis that has far-reaching and life-changing implications). Patterson (2002) discusses family definitions of situations with regard to family meanings, stating there are three levels of those meanings: “(a) families’ definitions of their demands (primary appraisal) and capabilities (secondary appraisal); (b) their identity as a family (how they see themselves internally as a unit); and (c) their world view (how they see their family in relationship to systems outside of their family)” (p. 351).

SI theory elevates *the self* in explaining what motivates people to act. According to Mead (1934), one's self is ever-changing and malleable and results from the ongoing interaction a person has with others. Social interactions are powerful agents in shaping views of self, including self-views that are related to resilience, that is, feeling competent to deal with uncertainty or adversity. From a collective point of view, the concept of self shaped by social interaction can be applied to the family level as well, which is broadly reflected in the work of Reiss (1981) on family paradigms.

Boss's (2002, 2006) theorizing and research on military personnel and families has provided a core and significant SI understanding of what families' experience. In the early 1970s, Boss studied the families of American soldiers missing in action in Vietnam and Laos. Subsequently, Boss (2002) studied numerous other family situations where separation and loss were present. Two interrelated concepts emerged from her work that have been highly heuristic in studies of military family resilience: (a) ambiguous stressor events, including ambiguous loss, and (b) boundary ambiguity. The first concept, ambiguous stressor events, focused on the "A" or the "event or situation" (stressor variable) in the ABCX Model. In some cases, it is difficult to obtain the facts necessary to understand the stressor event itself, which results in an ambiguous or uncertain situation. For example, will the combat injury result in a long-term disability or not? The family's coping process is hampered when members have difficulty understanding exactly what they are dealing with.

The concept of boundary ambiguity focused directly on the "C" or "meaning component" in the ABCX model, which Boss (2002) defined as the "perceptual outcome" of ambiguous loss (p. 30). It contains two elements or situations, one being where a family member is physically missing (not present) but psychologically present, perhaps because her/his status of being alive is not known (an example is a soldier missing in action). A second type of boundary ambiguity occurs when a family member is physically present but psychologically absent, as in the situation when a service member has suffered profound brain damage with associated memory loss as a result of a blast injury (TBI). In both instances, families are unsure, disorganized, and in a sense "frozen" (Boss, 2006, pp. 7–8). In Boss's theory, boundary ambiguity occurs when it is unclear who is in and who is out of the family, who is a real and functioning family member, and who can be counted on and who cannot (Boss, 2006, p. 12). Boundary ambiguity is a risk factor for families. When circumstances such as family separation occur (deployment as one example), families draw on their inner strengths, as well as their social connections, to maintain balance, certainty, and predictability.

Recently, Huebner, et al. (2007) accessed Boss's theorizing to examine adjustment among youth in military families when a parent is deployed. This study examined four categories of data including overall perceptions of loss, boundary ambiguity, changes in mental health, and relationship conflict. Findings revealed broad-based concern over the deployed parents' welfare, and their own welfare as the deployment progressed. Adolescents acted out toward others and had a greater tendency for emotional outbursts. Their depression and anxiety were related to persistent uncertainty about the well-being of the deployed parent. Boundary ambiguity was evident because of the deployed parent's status of being present psychologically, but not present physically, during the deployment; and being present physically but sometimes not psychologically present during the subsequent reintegration period that follows deployment.

A final example is Huebner's (2009) discussion of meaning and attachment related internal working models as applied to military deployment and families, which is rooted in SI. In discussing contrasting reactions to separation due to deployment ("This deployment separation is scary and I can't cope" versus "This deployment separation is a challenge to be dealt with"), Huebner suggests an amplified way of looking at the relationships between the resources that families have that can support them during stressful times ("B" factors in the ABC-X framework), and how families perceive and define their circumstances ("C" factor in the model). Her goal was to explain how military families can best access resources available to them, and she suggests that an important primary resource is *attachment security* (the bond a person has with important others; this is akin to social attachment). Also discussed are *internal working models*, essentially views of self and of others that often form through early experiences in relationships.



In sum, SI theory is well-aligned with accounting for variation in family resilience. As a theory, SI opens up the “black box” of “family shared outlook,” and captures the construction of meaning in “context.” As seen in the work of Boss above, SI is a theoretical cornerstone in family stress theory, which is discussed next.

### FAMILY STRESS THEORY

Family stress theory is the most explicit of the theories reviewed in its application to military family resilience during a time of war (MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010). Family stress theory in its different variations draws upon both LCT and SI theory, as well as other conceptual frameworks, including systems theory, ecological theory, and family developmental theory (Bowen, Richman, & Bowen, 2000; Everson & Camp, 2011; Walsh, 1996).

Family stress theory has its origin in Hill’s (1949) seminal study, *Families under stress: Adjustment to the crisis of war separation and reunion*, which he later described as the ABCX model (Hill, 1958). In Chapter 2 of his book, which addressed the sociology of family crisis and family adjustment, Hill described this model:

At least three variables are at work to determine whether a given event becomes a crisis [the X factor] for any given family: (1) the hardships of the situation or event itself [the A factor], (2) the resources of the family, its role structure, flexibility, and previous history with crisis [the B factor], and (3) the definition the family makes of the event [the C factor]; that is, whether family members treat the event as if it were or as if it were not a threat to their status, their goals, and objectives. (p. 9)

Although the outcomes in Hill’s model were family adjustment and family crisis rather than family resilience, they are relevant in that his focus was on a family versus an individual outcome. Hill recognized that he was pushing into uncharted territory in his focus on the family system. In his discussion of crisis and adjustment, he noted that “Thinking at the family level is third dimensional in a sense, and we have only recently attempted it” (p. 11).

Hill focused on the process of family adjustment in response to the family confronting a crisis situation (e.g., “angle of recovery” and “level of reorganization”), which is consistent with our conceptualization of family resilience as the process rather than the outcome. His “truncated roller-coaster pattern of adjustment to crisis” is foundational to his family stress theory, which involves going from crisis to disorganization to recovery to reorganization (p. 14). The “angle of recovery” for the family system was dependent on its crisis-meeting resources and the meaning that the family system gave to its situation. Hill identified a number of family-level resources that he predicted were potentially predictive of positive adjustment to the crisis associated with war separation and reunion, including the level of family integration and family adaptability.

In the context of the four dimensions that Hawley and DeHaan (1996) associate with the ability of families to demonstrate resilience, Hill’s work was particularly instructive to the interaction of risk and protective factors and to the family’s shared outlook. Both dimensions were instrumental in his ABCX model. For example, Hill (1949) offered what he termed a “classification of family breakdowns, which sorted stressors or risk factors into groups depending on their source (extra-family versus intra-family) and nature (dismemberment only, accession only, demoralization only, and demoralization plus dismemberment or accession) (pp. 9–10). In Hill’s model, war separation and reunion were viewed as stressor events that had the potential of producing stress and crisis depending on the resources available to the family and its appraisal or definition of its presenting situation.

Hill proposed a number of resources (protective factors or assets) that he hypothesized were potentially predictive of adjustment to war separation and reunion. In some cases, he softened his predictions from hypotheses to “hunches” (p. 18). Although his subsequent work focused on the role of family development (e.g., Mederer & Hill, 1983), this was not addressed in the 1949 work.

Neither did he address the role of context. In fact, the first chapter of the book is titled, "The Family as a Closed System" (p. 3). Although Hill discussed the challenges of the researcher entering the privacy of the home in this chapter, he also noted the "internal" nature of his study. As he stated, "Residual categories that receive scant attention are extra-family influences, such as, interfamily operations, social forces of urbanization, secularization, and war itself" (p. 7). However, the extensions of his work in the literature have addressed each of the four dimensions, including family development and context, although not necessarily in a resilience framework.

Hill's early work built the cornerstones for the work of many others. H. McCubbin and his colleagues were instrumental in extending Hill's work. McCubbin and Patterson (1983) extended the original ABC-X model to include post-crisis variables and the build-up of stressors from previous crises (the Double ABC-X model and the Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response model), and McCubbin and McCubbin (1988) further extended this work by adding family types (T-Double ABCX model) and a focus on family resiliency (Resiliency Model of Family Adjustment and Adaptation). McCubbin's collaboration with Olson (Olson, McCubbin, & Associates, 1983) combined a focus on family stress and change with the Circumplex Model of Families (a three-dimensional model including a focus on family cohesion, adaptability, and communication) within a developmental family life cycle perspective. In 1983, McCubbin, Patterson, and Lavee used the Double ABC-X model and the FAAR model to frame a study of 1,000 Army families who had faced relocation to West Germany. A series of resulting empirical articles (e.g., Bowen, 1989; Lavee, McCubbin, & Patterson, 1985; McCubbin & Lavee, 1986), included attention to family diversity in the military in the form of social class and ethnicity (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1988).

In 2002, Patterson published an article in which she attempted to integrate family resilience and family stress theory. The Family Adjustment and Adaptation Response (FAAR) model was used as the family stress model. Patterson, a former student and colleague of McCubbin, specified four central constructs in the FAAR model, which she italicized in describing the focus of the model: "families engage in active processes to balance *family demands* with *family capabilities* as these interact with *family meanings* to arrive at a level of *family adjustment and adaptation*" (p. 350).

Patterson (2002) offered two important conceptual clarifications. First, she distinguished family resilience from individual resilience: "To be considered family resilience (in contrast to individual resilience), the outcome of interest should be at the family system level, where a minimum of two family members are involved; that is, it should represent the product of family relationship(s)" (p. 352). In addition, she distinguished family resilience as a process from family resiliency, which reflects the family's capacity to handle its presenting circumstances: "*family resiliency* could be used to describe the capacity of a family system to successfully manage their life circumstances and *family resilience* could be used to describe the processes by which families are able to adapt and function competently following exposure to significant adversity or crises" (p. 352). Although social scientists seem to agree that family resilience refers to a process, the concept of family resiliency lacks consistent definition in the literature (cf., Bowen & Martin, 2011).

In making these distinctions, Patterson (2002) focused the study of family resilience on what Hawley and DeHaan (1996) described as "the interactive combination of risk and protective factors" (p. 7). As factors and processes that moderate the relationship between adversity and family-level outcomes, risk and protective factors can be across units of analysis: individual, family, and community (cf. Patterson, p. 356). In support of Angell's (1936) study of depression era families and the work of Olson, et al. (1983), Patterson notes the importance of family cohesiveness and family flexibility as protective factors in the ability of families to adjust and adapt in the context of adversity.

Boss's contextual model of family stress builds directly on Hill's ABCX model (Boss, 2002). Unlike McCubbin, whose theoretical attention has focused more on the post-crisis adaptation of families, Boss's work has focused more on what keeps families from experiencing crisis. In addition,

although great care needs to be taken in overgeneralizing, McCubbin's work, like Hill's, has focused relatively more on the internal workings of families rather than the larger context in which families are embedded. Boss, on the other hand, gives considerable attention both to the family's internal and external contexts.

In her contextual model of family stress management, Boss (2002) discusses five components of the family's external context: heredity, development, economy, history, and culture. Unlike the internal context of the family (structural, psychological, and philosophical), the external context is outside of the control of the family. Boss, who describes her model as grounded in symbolic interactionism within a larger postmodern perspective of social constructionism, clearly addresses Hawley and DeHaan's dimension of context, which includes concepts addressing the developmental level of the family and its sociohistorical and cultural context. Yet, as mentioned above in our application of symbolic interactionism, we believe that Boss's greatest contribution to the study of family resilience is her focus in her model on the construction of meaning (the family's construction of shared meaning). Boss defines a family perception as "the group's unified view of a particular stressor event or situation" (p. 23). In describing her work with distressed families, Boss describes her efforts in helping each family and individual family members give new meaning to their presenting situation in a way that promotes their management of stress and their adaptation as a family unit: "How are you going to make this a story you can live with as a family and as individuals?" (p. 13).

An excellent example of Boss's model applied to military family resilience is her recent co-authored chapter (Wiens & Boss, 2006). In the chapter, Wiens and Boss identify both protective factors, including attention to community supports, and risk factors associated with military family separation. They also present Boss's conceptual family stress model. Particularly helpful in understanding military family resilience is their discussion of the cultural context of life in the military that places normative constraints on families and their coping patterns, such as the potential stigma of having and reporting problems in a "warrior-oriented" organization that extols physical and mental hardiness for both service members and their families.

A number of studies with military samples have been framed and informed by family stress theory (e.g., Bowen, Orthner, & Zimmerman, 1993), although relatively few have focused on the family system as the unit of analysis (e.g., McCubbin & Lavee, 1986). Following Hill's focus on war separation and reunion, the issue of deployment continues to receive a significant level of attention as a family stressor event, especially deployments during a time of war (Mmari, Roche, Sudhinaraset, & Blum, 2009; Pincus, House, Christensen, & Adler, 2001; Sheppard, et al., 2010). Unique stressors have been associated with each phase of the combat deployment experience: before deployment, during deployment, and after deployment (*cf.*, MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010). Other military-related and family-related stressors may compound the influence of wartime deployment on the family. For example, MacDermid Wadsworth (2010) discussed the notion of "trauma transmission" (p. 539) among family members from the combat experiences of the service member, including physical and psychological injuries that result from war. Importantly, life in the military is inherently stressful for families even in peacetime, including deployment and training related family separations, relocations, and remote assignments, and dangerous jobs and challenging duty assignments for the service member are customary and usual in the military.

Before closing this discussion of family stress theory, it is important to identify a modified version of Hill's traditional ABCX model of family stress that explicitly addresses the context of racism in American society: The *Mundane Extreme Environmental Stress (MEES) model* by Peters and Massey (1983). The MEES model has implications for the study of military family resilience, although we were unable to identify literature that had applied this model to military families. Framed from the perspective of Black American families, three additional terms are added into the model. An additional A factor reflects specific acts of racial discrimination; a D factor represents ongoing and pervasive (mundane) racism in society; and a Y factor describes the reactions of

Black families to the A and D factors (Murry, 2000). The MEES model provides an opportunity to examine the additional burden on families in the military fueled by oppression and discrimination. In the context of increasing racial and ethnic diversity in the military services, the MEES model has rich potential to examine a critical aspect of context in the lives of many military families, as well as to examine other types and forms of oppression and discrimination (e.g., gender, social class, family background, religion, and sexual orientation or at the intersection of these statuses). This includes attention to the relatively small proportion and the disadvantaged nature of the US population that volunteer for military service (Elder, Wang, Spence, Adkins, & Brown, 2010).

### LIMITATIONS OF THEORY USAGE IN UNDERSTANDING MILITARY FAMILIES

We contend that most studies of military family resilience have given insufficient attention to the community context in which families are embedded, and moreover have typically assessed community context from the perspective of the individual. In this micro-level approach, the grouping or clustering of individuals is ignored, as is families do not interface with other families (Mancini, Bowen, & Martin, 2005a). In other cases, proxy variables are used to reflect community context, such as its physical and demographic infrastructure. From our perspective, a full appreciation of military family resilience requires attention to the larger community context in which families work and live.

We recently proposed a social organizational approach to capture community-level processes that may influence family outcomes (cf. Mancini & Bowen, 2013). Such contextual effects theories attempt to account for variations in individual outcomes by calling attention to variables at the individual level and to larger group-level processes, including those at the collective family and community levels (Jacard & Jacoby, 2010; White & Teachman, 2005). In the next section, we present our attempt to understand families in their larger community context. This analysis involves more explicit attention to the role of context as a dimension in understanding variations in military family resilience.

### FUTURE THEORETICAL DIRECTIONS: THEORY OF COMMUNITY ACTION AND CHANGE

In 1985, Walker, in a critique of Hill's (1949) model, called for a "contextual study of families under stress" (p. 834). From our perspective, although the original ABCX model has been conceptually embellished by the work of McCubbin, Boss, and others (Burr, Klein, & Associates, 1994) to embrace contextual influences, the role of communities as social organizational settings in which families experience and cope with stressor events has not received sufficient attention. In particular, community has been evaluated from the perceptions of family members as a mechanism of social support (a micro perspective) (e.g., Lavee, McCubbin, & Patterson, 1985) rather than a larger context in which family life in a community is enacted (a macro-perspective). From the perspective of Boss's Contextual Model of Family Stress, we describe a third band of influence on family stress management: community context. This band of influence lies between the external context ("heredity, development, economy, history, culture"), which Boss considers to be outside of the family's control, and the internal context ("structural, psychological, philosophical") of the family in Boss's (2002) model. Like the internal context from Boss's perspective, the family does have influence on this community context.

We turn to review our work on community context factors, which we consider to be significant elements for understanding military family resilience. In support of an ecological perspective to the study of military family resilience, families are considered to be nested in larger community networks that shape, inform, and constrain patterns of interaction (Bowen & Martin, 2011; Bowen, Martin, Mancini, & Nelson, 2000). In turn, families have a reciprocal impact on these larger

community network forces. Families act upon their environments, and they are not simply passive units entirely receptive to environmental actions. We take the position that families are largely embedded in the layers and levels of social life, rather than largely insulated from social life. We also contend the aggregation of families, through the networks they form become primary enactors of change in community contexts which in turns influences family situations and experiences.

The *theory of community action and change* was developed as a framework for informing assessment efforts, and the associated prevention and intervention programming used by the US military to promote military family and community resilience (Mancini & Bowen, 2013). Mancini and Bowen recently provided a detailed review of the history and development of the theory, and the basic tenets of the theory have been published elsewhere as well (Bowen, et al., 2000; Mancini & Bowen, 2009; Mancini, Bowen, & Martin, 2005a,b; Mancini, Martin, & Bowen, 2003). Consequently, we focus our attention on key assumptions and concepts from the theory for understanding variations in military family resilience.

First, families are assumed to be open systems that are situated in dynamic interaction with the environment in which they are embedded. This environment has many different features that frame and inform family functioning and interaction, and family members are not necessarily aware of how this environment shapes and constrains them or how they necessarily influence the environment. As noted above, Boss (2002) has identified some important aspects of this broader environment in her discussion of the external context. However, we focus on an aspect of the environment that is more immediate and proximal in the lives of families: the social organizational processes in the local community in which families live (e.g., urban neighborhoods, suburban subdivisions, military bases, or communities in rural areas).

Social organization is used as an umbrella term to describe “the collection of values, norms, processes, and behavior patterns within a community that organize, facilitate, and constrain the interactions among community members” (Mancini et al., 2003, p. 319). From an action theory perspective, the operation of formal (e.g., military and civilian community agencies, the unit chain of command) and informal networks (e.g., extended family, friends, work associates, neighbors) is the major focus of interaction and prevention efforts to influence military family resilience (Bowen, et al., 2000). Formal and informal networks operate within a larger physical (i.e., built community) and social (i.e., demographic composition) infrastructure that frame and inform their operation (Mancini & Bowen, 2013). Adopting a contextual effects perspective (Bowen & Pittman, 1995), the operation of these networks is assumed to be more or less exogenous to any one family. Thus, the unit of analysis is extended from the individual family (a micro-level orientation) to also consider families in their community context (a macro-level orientation).

Community capacity is an emergent outcome in communities that results from the social capital found in the particular configuration and operation of formal and informal networks. Community capacity has two components: “the extent to which community members (a) demonstrate a sense of shared responsibilities for the general welfare of the community and its members and (b) demonstrate collective competence in taking advantage of opportunities for addressing community needs and confronting situations that threaten the safety and well-being of community members” (Bowen, et al., 2000, p. 7). From the perspective of the theory, the nature, level, and pattern of shared responsibility and collective competence in a community influences the results that families are able to achieve over time. From a military family resilience perspective, this would include the trajectories of individual families in achieving family-level results in the context of adversity.

Importantly, families may not be aware of the influence of the larger community on their processes and outcomes. However, in our most recent work (Mancini & Bowen, 2013), we propose that a sense of community is a potential social psychological mediator between social organizational processes and family results at the micro-level, such as military family resilience. We defined sense of community as “the extent to which individuals and families feel a sense of identification, esprit de corps, and attachment with their community.” We assume that families are more likely

to achieve favorable results in the context of a high sense of community. This aspect of the theory requires further elaboration and testing, although our earlier research demonstrated a positive link between the perceived sense of community and the self-reported family adaptation of married Air Force members (Bowen, Mancini, Martin, Ware, & Nelson, 2003). The challenge as discussed by Zelditch (1991) is to begin to specify the social psychological links between structure and action.

The theory of community action and change has many nuances and caveats that were not discussed in the context of this short overview, such as the fact that communities, like individuals and families, have developmental pathways and rhythms—their own life course (The Harwood Group, 1999). For example, communities that surround military installations often change significantly during times of large-scale deployments, which have effects on the local economy, the larger opportunity structure, and the demographic composition of the community (e.g., increase in number of temporary single adult households). In addition, families may need communities to operate differently in support of resilient outcomes at different stages in the family life cycle and in the context of different types of adversities (Bowen, Richman, & Bowen, 2000). For example, a high casualty rate in a particular military unit may have devastating effects on the community in which the unit is embedded.

## CONCLUSION

We have discussed three theoretical frameworks from family science that have applicability to understanding military family resilience—life course theory, symbolic interactionism, and family stress theory. Each has merit in understanding the nuances of family life through the lens of context and developmental level (life course), the family's shared outlook (symbolic interaction), and the combination of risk and protective factors (stress theory). We have added a theory of community action and change to the mix that draws attention to local geographic networks that frame and inform family functioning and interaction and from which families may derive resources and support. This community approach elevates the significance of networks of families for affecting the quality of family life. At the least, a more intentional approach to research on military families using any one of these lenses represents an advance, because it will lead to a more coherent body of knowledge, one that provides clearer guidance on improving the theorizing and also improving the research. Of greater potential significance is examining military family resilience through the intersection of these theories.

The understanding of military family resilience will benefit from greater intentionality about marking where these theories intersect and overlap. As one example, life course theory is a broad lens that captures the dynamic nature of families in historical, family, and individual time. It also enlightens us about contexts in which military families live; individuals in military families are part of a much larger cohort that has an influence on their lives. Consequently, families where one spouse or adult partner is a military member may be mainly interacting with civilian families (particularly the case with Guard and Reserve families). Their reference group (cohort) is likely to have remote experience with separation, transition, and change, compared with military families. Therefore the understanding they have of deployment experiences is very limited, and military families may not feel their situation is well understood. They may even question their own motives for continuing a military lifestyle.

Using this same example, symbolic interaction contributes a lens that elevates what happens within a family that is connected with these contexts, for instance, Blumer's (1969) suggestion that meanings originate through social interactions. In addition, "orientational others" (Kuhn, 1972) may be mainly other military families (more likely with the Active force, and especially those who live on or near the base or installation), or mainly non-military. The impacts of these orientational others on the military family's shared outlook will vary dramatically.

In many respects, family stress theory is the most encompassing of the three theories; it contains elements of contexts (e.g., the external context in Boss's model, which includes attention to time and history), attention to both risk and protective factors (the "A" and "B" components), and elements of attaching meaning (the "C" component). In addition, the family stress approach incorporates vividly possible outcomes, such as military family resilience. As discussed earlier, the concepts of stressor events, especially ambiguous loss, and the family's perception of who is in and out of the family (boundary ambiguity) that may result from ambiguous loss provide a rich set of conceptual lenses to understand military family resilience. Yet, family stress theory does not give sufficient attention to the community context in which families are embedded—the primary community structures (formal and informal networks) in which family life is enacted. The theory of community action and change offers "grist for the mill" in future applications of family stress theory to understanding military family resilience—a band of influence on the family system that lies between the internal and the external context in Boss's (2002) model.

An important challenge for future theoretical development is to ensure a greater correspondence between the concept of military family resilience and its measurement. The empirical testing of theory requires such alignment. Drawing upon the definition of family resilience from Hawley and DeHaan (1996) and the integrative review by Patterson (2002) of family resilience and family stress theory, we concluded that the study of military family resilience was distinguished from the study of individual resilience by its focus on the family unit as the outcome of interest (e.g., couples, parent-child dyads, siblings, or the family itself). As mentioned earlier, the resilience of the family is determined by a focus on at least one system-level outcome from two or more family members over time in the context of adversity.

In the time since Hawley and DeHaan (1996) published their article, statistical developments have provided a means to better capture these system-level outcomes, even when the data are collected at the individual level. For example, Sayer and Klute (2005) present the use of multilevel models to study dyads, such as husbands and wives or parents and children, in which both members of the dyad are nested in a relationship and provide the same information (i.e., relational data about themselves or about their relationship). The authors also discuss extensions of the model to handle data from more than two group members and longitudinal data that capture group members at more than one time point, which are essential in the study of military family resilience (*cf.* DeHaan, Hawley, & Deal, 2002). Importantly, in the context of our theory of community action and change, the multilevel approach can capture the nesting of the dyads and families in larger systems, such as the neighborhood or community. Unfortunately, we are not aware of military datasets that include multiple members from the same family, that examine military families over time, and that capture the functioning of families within higher levels of aggregation, such as neighborhoods, military bases, or local communities.

In addition to quantitative approaches, such as the use of multilevel models, qualitative approaches have rich potential for understanding military family resilience, especially examining families as a unit over time in the context of adversity. A primary merit of qualitative analyses lies in elaborating meaning and explanation. These qualitative methods are ideally suited for examining the family unit rather than as a single individual (e.g., spouse, child) or group of individuals over time, and they provide an opportunity to illuminate the nuances in the different paths that families may follow in response to adversity. These methods provide a means to capture what we described earlier as "noise amplification" in the study of military family resilience.

Several recent studies have applied qualitative approaches to the study of military family resilience (e.g., Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008; Huebner, et al., 2007; Mmari, et al., 2009; Wiens & Boss, 2006). Yet, none of these studies meet the three main requirements for the examination of military family resilience: the presence of adversity; longitudinal data involving at least three time points, including at least one observation prior to the adversity; and family-level data.

In conclusion, theory, research design, measurement, and analysis need to work in concert in future studies of military family resilience. Clearly, in the case of military family resilience, research methods and the application of these methods lag behind the theoretical richness and anchoring of the concept. Yet, on a positive note, LCT, SI theory, and family stress theory provide three cornerstones from which to build conceptual models of military family resilience for empirical testing. The incorporation of the theory of community action and change will bring greater attention to the community context in which military families are embedded. The incorporation of theories that fall within the critical/emancipatory paradigm (cf. Burr, 1995), such as feminist family theories and critical race theory, will direct more attention to issues of power, status and differential access to resources in the study of military family resilience, including attention to the demography of those who serve and those who go to war. To end on a positive note, we see the study of military family resilience to have a rich theoretical history and foundation from which to build.

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