

# Broadening Understandings of “Identity” Among Military Partners: A Multidisciplinary Reflection from the United Kingdom; A Research Note

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## Abstract

As gendered organizations, militaries generate and perpetuate specific institutional and cultural expectations that construct and inform gendered identities. Neither fully military nor fully civilian, the (largely female) spouses and partners of military personnel occupy a liminal position that requires development of multifaceted, complex, and at times, contradictory identities. Despite well-established identity theory literature supporting myriad positionalities, research exploring military partner identities frequently remains confined to specific contexts, situations, and approaches. Based on reflections from our work with U.K. military partners, this conceptual article presents a summary of multidisciplinary discussions of our collective research relating to partner identity. Through this discussion, we highlight

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ways in which research, including our own, could (1) move beyond understanding partner identity within situational and contextual “silos,” (2) challenge the conceptualization of partner identities as static and fixed, and (3) acknowledge the visibility (and invisibility) of certain military partners across different military and social contexts. Specifically, to better acknowledge and recognize fluid, flexible, and intersecting identities, we call for research to embrace more interdisciplinary approaches and innovative methods and pursue greater commitment to reflecting the voices of a wider demographic of military partners who continue to be overlooked in present research.

**Keywords**

military partners, military spouses, intimate partners, identities, gender

**Introduction**

Militaries are understood to be deeply gendered organizations, (re)producing structural and cultural expectations of accepted behaviors, practices, and ways of being that inform the performance of gendered identities among military communities (Cree, 2020a, 2020b; Enloe, 2000; Gray, 2017). Research focusing on “military and veteran partners”—those, mostly women, in a significant or married relationship with a current or ex-serving member of the Armed Forces—has demonstrated the ways in which they often occupy a contradictory and gendered position within military politics. On the one hand, they are drawn into the military sphere insofar as their emotional and practical support for military service is constructed as integral to operational effectiveness and retention of service personnel (Ministry of Defence, 2022a, 2022b; Walker et al., 2020); on the other hand, military policies and practices often marginalize and politically situate partners on the periphery of military life. This practice creates a liminal and discrete space from the military institution that partners occupy (Enloe, 2000; Gribble et al., 2019a; Hyde, 2016). While military partners have been articulated as mobile agents at the center of the civil/military divide, navigating and negotiating the presence of military norms within their lives enthusiastically or reluctantly (Hyde, 2024), this divide is “constantly blurring, shifting, moving” (Baker et al., 2016, p. 147), subjecting partners to an ever-changing range and combination of cultural, institutional, and intrapersonal pressures which inform myriad positionalities (Stuttaford, 2020), which can continue even after personnel leave service (Spikol et al., 2024).

As early to mid-career researchers from a range of disciplines within the United Kingdom, the authors share a dedication to understanding and tracing the ways in which military requirements, cultures, and gendered constructs shape the lives of military partners. Our work is joined, in particular, by a focus on identity formation among military partners—the ways living within, or adjacent to, the Armed Forces community is used by partners to construct their sense of identity, or how it is used

by the community, and members of it, to shape the same. By critically engaging with our own research, our ongoing discussions as a group, and the broader landscape of scholarship regarding military and veteran partners, this article presents our reflections on the multifaceted ways in which “identity” has been theorized and considered across our work. Through this article, we aim to start a conversation around how research in this area may be further developed by drawing on a deeper theoretical engagement with the concept of “identity” and how this might be experienced and interpreted by military partners.

We begin with a brief overview of relevant theories of identity, followed by an exploration of the ways in which military cultures and gendered cultural norms shape partner identities to produce complex, multifaceted, and, at times, contradictory positionalities. Initiated by conversations about the strengths and limitations of our own work, we use these presentations as a foundation to examine the framing of military partner identities in the research literature. Throughout the article, we argue that these framings are too often examined within *situational* or *contextual* silos, which tend to rely on static notions of who military partners are. Such siloing obscures the identity experiences of partners and works to limit and constrain potential knowledge produced from such research. It also presents ethical implications relating to our role as researchers as well as our commitments to the communities and individuals we do research with. We conclude by encouraging and advocating for more holistic, comprehensive, and creative approaches toward understanding diverse partner identities within military and veteran family research.

Specifically, across the article, we make three key calls for action to researchers working with military families: (1) to deepen understandings of identity by advancing past thinking about military partners within “siloed” situations and contexts; (2) to move beyond thinking about military partner identities in binary, simplistic, or static ways; and (3) to acknowledge the changing visibility (and invisibility) of military partners across different military and social contexts and the current neglect of some social groups within the research. While specific to a U.K. setting, we believe these tenets have wider application to military families’ researchers in other contexts and would allow for greater depth of understanding of military partner identity across the field. Thus, we encourage readers to think about the arguments we make here and if/how they may relate to the military contexts on and in which they conduct research. Indeed, we write this not only as a “call to action” but also as a “conversation starter” with our (inter)national colleagues.

## **Military Partner Identities: Understanding the Role of Military Culture and Gender**

### *Conceptualizing Identities*

Identity is central to our well-being, confidence, and sense of belonging. Rather than a static state as initially proposed by some theorists, identity has become widely

recognized as a psychosocial task that spans a lifetime (McAdams, 2014). Narrative theories of identity seek to understand how people negotiate, adopt, or resist so-called “master” scripts from broader cultural values, beliefs, and values by incorporating these alongside potential alternative narratives to construct and build their own personal identities (McLean & Syed, 2016). According to McAdams (2011), such identities become internalized and (re)created within personal narratives to make meaning out of lived experiences, a process that extends across the life course, making any “one” identity impossible to capture.

Concepts like “transculturality” or “third culture” help us to explore this complexity to an extent, as they give increased credence to identity as something fluid that is actively (re)created by individuals as they move across and between the social and physical environments they live within, flexing and changing as they move from school or work (student or professional) to home (parent or child) and family (sister, aunt) (Welsch, 1999). These ideas also give rise to greater considerations of *hybridization* where there is no dominant culture, rather all cultures become satellites of each other and, therefore, open to adoption and mixing with other cultural groups (Welsch, 1999). Transculturality/third culture has been considered within literature on children from military families (see Pollock et al., 2017) but has not yet been widely adopted when considering military partners despite their potential for expanding understanding. Broader life course approaches which emphasize the ways in which individual trajectories are shaped by social, historical, and institutional contexts over time may also be useful for this field (Elder, 1994). For example, adopting a life course approach, such as that proposed by Segal et al. (2015), whereby understanding the ways in which key milestones (such as military demands, family life, and their own civilian careers) may influence well-being, and thereby identity, may provide a particularly useful lens through which to explore conceptualizations of, and influences on, partner identity. It is the theoretical principles of how these conceptual framings of transculturality/third culture and life course approaches are used by individuals to construct identity/ies in multiple and complex ways that underpin the critique we raise in the following discussion.

### *The Production and Reproduction of Partner Identities: Military Culture and Practices*

In the military context, much research has focused on the socialization and creation of idealized identities among military personnel as well as their partners within the dominant military culture. Traits of hegemonic masculinity such as hierarchy, discipline, and competition (McAllister et al., 2019; Woodward & Duncanson, 2017), and its “complementary” hegemonic feminine traits of loyalty, devotion, and self-sacrifice are commonly valued within institutional military hierarchies (Basham & Catignani, 2018; Enloe, 2000), and often conflated with constructs of the “idealized” soldier and their wife or partner (Enloe, 2000; Gray, 2017). Within these idealizations, the family (man and wife) is essential to militarism, not only merely

as a support structure but also as a site where military values are reproduced and contested. Military partners are not simply “supportive others”; they are co-constructors of the military-civilian nexus, and their sense of identity (identities) are shaped accordingly.

A well-established body of feminist literature in the past 20 years highlights the ways in which military partners are socialized into performing gendered labor in support of personnel that is, in turn, fundamental to maintaining the operational effectiveness of the military (Basham & Catignani, 2018; Hyde, 2017; Long, 2022b; Spanner, 2020). Military demands such as unpredictable and irregular working hours, long absences from home, and frequent relocations, mean serving members have limited ability to contribute to the demands of family life. As a result of these demands, military partners must take on the majority of household responsibilities—providing both practical support (in the form of domestic labor) and emotional support to both serving personnel and their children—significantly curtailing their own opportunities for education, career development, and financial independence and affecting health and well-being (Basham & Catignani, 2018; Enloe, 2000; Gray, 2017; Gribble & Fear, 2022; Howell, 2015; Hyde, 2016; Long, 2022a; Ziff & Garland-Jackson, 2019). Some partners have described these expectations as “doing time” in the military, in which they serve alongside those who have enlisted, and become deeply embedded within military institutional contexts (Burland & Lundquist, 2011).

These idealized—and in many ways, unachievable—expectations highlight the entanglement between military and family life, particularly in relation to what it means to be a “good military partner,” and relatedly, how it is made sense of by military partners themselves (Cree, 2020a; Enloe, 2000; Gray, 2017; Hyde, 2016; Long, 2022b). Hyde (2024) argues that “the complexity and contradictory nature of the experiences and identities of women married to servicemen remain largely obscured by the easy stereotypes” as they engage, bargain with, and even disidentify with these constructs through their own self-conceptualization, their interactions with the military institution, and popular cultural representations (p. 6). Cree (2020a) also critiques “easy” stereotypes of military partners by analyzing their representation in performances in the Military Wives Choir, arguing partners are often characterized through tropes of patriotic feminine stoicism. In many ways, these stereotypes and gendered expectations are reductive and obscure the rich and diverse ways that military partners make sense of their complex identities and social roles.

That said, for all the pressures partners can experience through their connection with the military, militarized identities can be empowering for some women, evoking a sense of pride and tradition that may not be available in other occupations (Kritikos et al., 2020). Others report experiencing conflict between their military and civilian identities and actively seek to resist and “swerve” the imposition of militarized self-narratives (Page et al., 2025; Ziff & Garland-Jackson, 2019). Some of this conflict comes from the acknowledgment, including among partners themselves, that they sit “outside” the military—visible to the military when they are

being called upon to support military aims, and rendered invisible when they themselves require support (Gribble et al., 2019a; Spikol et al., 2024). Such experiences can drive partners to find ways to step outside of militarized contexts, either through employment (Gribble et al., 2019b), their social connections and relationships (Long, 2019; Page et al., 2025), or opting to live outside the physical remit of military bases (Gribble & Fear, 2022).

During our discussions, we reflected on the ways in which military partner identity is influenced by militarism and military culture, while acknowledging that these identities are often fluid and culturally flexible as partners shift between military and civilian communities in their everyday lives. Indeed, such reflections appear to align with the aforementioned theory of transculturality. Yet, such complexity and multiplicity are not always clearly reflected or attended to in our own work or that of others.

In the following sections, we outline the ways in which some of our collective research may have produced—inadvertently—more limited, and at times, binary representations of military partners' identities. Throughout we reflect on ways in which we might increase space for such complexity to come through in research and invite readers to consider these challenges as they may relate to their own work too.

## **Beyond Siloed Thinking: Expanding Identity Contexts**

### *Situational Silos: Broadening Perspectives of Military Partner Identities*

A shared refrain during our initial discussions was that as researchers within our individual disciplines, we have all too often taken the approach of focusing on the discrete experiences partners have of military life, leading to *situational siloing*, that is, focusing on partner identities in the context of specific events such as deployment, separation, or transition. While this focus may be influenced by the disciplinary foci and research methodologies we align ourselves with, and to a degree, the requirements of funding calls, this approach has been useful in aiding understandings of partner identities within these particular circumstances. However, we argue that moving beyond situational siloing toward a more expansive approach which explores identities across and between specific episodes of military life will guide deeper interrogations of this concept. The rest of this section illustrates how our understandings may be expanded by exploring some (dis)connections between different situational circumstances.

As a key feature of military life, it is unsurprising that much of the research exploring the ways in which partners' identities are shaped and informed by their partner's military service has focused on deployments, especially in the Iraq and Afghanistan eras. Personnel absences as a result of deployment often require partners to step into the breach to provide additional emotional labor to both the serving person and children in line with exaggerated ideals of femininity, womanhood, and home. Partners find themselves acting as the emotional anchor for the family, ensuring that the absence of the service member does not destabilize the family

dynamic—examples include maintaining the absent parent’s presence within the home by facilitating communication, sending care packages, letters, and texts, and collecting memories to share upon his return in an effort to protect and shield children from upset (Hyde, 2016; Long, 2022a; Stuttaford, 2020), as well as facilitating their re-integration into the family upon their return (Kyed et al., 2024; Long, 2022a; Senior, 2023; Senior et al., 2023). This practical and emotional labor extends to supporting the service member’s needs, even at geographical distance during training or deployments, which can place significant emotional strain experienced on the partner themselves (Gribble & Fear, 2022; Long, 2022a).

Research has also highlighted how many of the phenomenon described during operational deployments are also experienced during “weekending”—where personnel work away during the week, returning at the weekend—but at a greater frequency and pace. For partners in this situation, their position as a sole parent in the week and dual-parent family at the weekend is often difficult to balance within longer-term goals and ambitions within more elongated and chronic disruptions to family life (Gribble & Fear, 2022). Partner health and identity can be as severely challenged during weekending separations as during deployment, altering understandings of family structure and parenthood, placing pressure on families to “play nice” when they are together and creating disappointment and frustration (Gribble & Fear, 2022). The pressure for partners to maintain a stable and harmonious family environment often leads to suppression of their own emotional needs (Gray, 2023; Gribble et al., 2019a), which can have long-term psychological consequences (Gribble, Goodwin, & Fear, 2019; Senior et al., 2023). Cultural expectations from both the military and civilian society that military spouses will play the role of the supportive and self-sacrificing caregiver can also restrict open communication within the family (Carter & Renshaw, 2016), as well as support-seeking from welfare providers (Senior, 2023; Spikol et al., 2024), as partners may fear being perceived as ungrateful or unsupportive if they express frustration with the demands of their role (Long, 2022b).

By reflecting on the findings of some research across topics of deployment, weekending, and health/well-being, we start to get a sense of the complex interactions between the multiple experiences of military partners that may compound and interact with “identity” in interesting ways. Indeed, by moving beyond situational silos in research design, we may start to better understand the complexity of both experience and identity formation among military partners across different life circumstances, as constructed by Segal et al. (2015). Furthermore, such an approach also makes space for us to think beyond military-specific contexts too, such as encounters with employment or leisure, among other experiences, as these will also inform how partners make sense of their own identity.

### *Contextual Silos: “Merged” Military Identities*

We also consider how siloing may have appeared in our collective work through the ways partner identity may have become fused to that of personnel as “dependants”



within the permeable, albeit relatively closed, social hierarchy of the military community. As a dependant, many partners experience this (inadvertent) merging of their identity with that of the serving person—the so-called “two-person career”—whereby the spouses’ identity becomes intrinsically linked to that of the employee, in this case the serving member and creates a shared identity extending beyond that of the individual (Papanek, 1973). Policies and procedures within the military create and reinforce this framing via security concerns, such as limiting certain information to personnel only who must then pass this onto partners (Hyde, 2024), an act that excludes partners and reminds them of their “otherness” to the military (Gribble, 2019a). Research, sometimes unintentionally, may also reinforce this where it fails to more deeply interrogate gender, power dynamics, and hierarchy and how these may be incorporated or managed by partners when shifting or building identity or through focusing predominantly on the role of the military in partner experiences at the expense of other seminal events like matrescence and parenthood.

There is, of course, nuance within this framing for individuals. For partners themselves, merging of identity with the serving person can function as a positive psychological strategy, leading to pride, feelings of resilience, and the adoption of a “we” identity that values and validates couple-hood should it be voluntarily adopted (Hautzinger & Scandlyn, 2013; Senior, 2023; Spikol et al., 2024). For others, the overlap or eclipsing of their own individuality can result in a perceived loss of agency, impacting their sense of control, stability, and place (Gribble & Fear, 2022; Gribble et al., 2019b). Partners may come to view their role as limited to that of a supporting figure defined by their relationship to serving member rather than as someone with their own career aspirations, agency, and identity (Hyde, 2024). This phenomenon can be particularly pronounced in environments where partners are geographically isolated and lack access to social networks outside the military community that may offer alternative identities (Gribble, 2017). Research with partners of veterans highlights that this merging and linking of identities is not just confined to the period of military service, with caregiving spouses of veterans reporting difficulties in forming independent identities when taking responsibility for their (ex-)serving partners’ mental and physical needs (Senior et al., 2023; Spikol et al., 2024).

Where partners experience their identity as an extension of service personnel, they may also encounter a parallel rank system they are drawn into through their relationship with a serving member of the Armed Forces. Replication of the rank hierarchy among partners fixes partners into the rigidity of the military system and can lead to social stratification within both the military and civilian spheres (Hyde, 2024), complicating partners’ efforts to reconcile their identity with the military’s hierarchical social structures and norms of the wider community. Rank stratification can be reinforced through social interactions with other partners and labeling as “wife of”—visible via their incorporation into a particular position within the community through their relationship but often excluded, overlooked, or invisible as an individual (Gribble, 2017; Gribble et al., 2019b). The perpetuation of a “rank-by-association” system, wherein military spouses are largely seen through the lens of



their partner's military role, reinforces the marginalization of individual aspirations, and increasingly ties partners to the serving person (Basham & Catignani, 2018).

The internalization of these hierarchical structures can foster a sense of restricted agency, as partners may feel that their position within both the military community and society is largely dictated by their partner's rank, reducing their capacity to navigate multiple, often conflicting, social roles. As a consequence, a military partner's identity may experience a "symbolic subordination" within both military and civilian contexts (Gribble & Fear, 2022; Gribble et al., 2019a), wherein their contributions to the family unit, including emotional support and caregiving, often feel undervalued or overlooked (Gray, 2023). This can result in a perceived lack of recognition of the partner as an autonomous individual outside of their role within the military structure. Indeed, Gribble and Fear (2022) highlight how military partners come to perceive their own aspirations as secondary to the institutional demands of the military, leading to a sense of disempowerment. Compounding this is the sense of isolation that partners often experience, both from their peers and from broader civilian society (Gribble, 2017), as military communities produce and reinforce hierarchical divisions that restrict mobility and self-expression.

Such perceptions of "performing" rank can limit perceptions of personal control, resulting in complex—and at times, contradictory—feelings toward their partner as well as the institution (Gribble et al., 2019a). However, it is within these limitations that resistance and agency among partners become apparent. Rather than passively accepting these identities and associated social positions as prescribed by the military community, some attempt to subvert or resist these identities by creating connections with other partners with whom they would usually not be "allowed" to socialize, expressing great delight in their ability to "game" the system (Gribble et al., 2019b). Others opt to step outside the military community entirely, only interacting as much as is required to support their husband's career. Paid employment can also be an important means for partners to step outside of military and familial expectations and maintain or create a separate identity from that of their serving partner and the Armed Forces community at large (Gribble et al., 2019b), especially among those with caregiving roles (Spikol et al., 2024). By exploring how military rank influences partners' experiences, researchers can gain deeper insights into the interplay between institutional structures and personal identity, highlighting the ongoing challenges military families face in balancing personal autonomy with the demands of military life. It should also explore ways in which partners seek opportunities to escape perceived restrictions via resistance, removal, or subversion.

In light of these challenges, we propose that understanding the lived experience of military partners requires a more nuanced understanding of how rank, gender, and social stratification intersect to shape identity, agency, and choice as well as how partners themselves seek to create identity within and outside the confines of the military community. Rather than simple hierarchies of rank, although fundamental to social organization within the military, we believe further exploration using a transcultural approach would be beneficial for elucidating partner movement and negotiation of

their own identity within the military systems they encounter as well as how and when partners come to create and navigate self-identity across both military and civilian spheres. This will help us to better understand how military partners make sense of and navigate their military imbrication, and their conscious or incidental resistance to it, but account for wider, nonmilitary influences on identity formation.

### *Challenging Static Notions of the Military Partner Identity*

Building from this, in our second challenge, we call upon researchers to recognize that partner identities are not static, but rather fluid, multiple, complex, and sometimes (often) contradictory at different times and contexts, and reflect on how this may be reflected in their own work. As previously noted, identity itself is not conceptualized as static; instead, it shifts and changes over the life course; partner identity might change and flex between those that are more aligned *within* or *outside* of the military community as a transcultural shift (Welsch, 1999).

Work by Huddlestone (2024) highlights the ways in which military partner identity is constantly “under construction,” shaped by shifting roles, responsibilities, and external recognition, while Palmer and Gribble (Forthcoming) use of “mundane” diary-interview methods to illuminate partner lifestyle behaviors has given scope to view this on a granular level through the everyday and (extra-)ordinary entanglements of the military in women’s lives. While the changing nature of military partner identities has received some attention, particularly in work focused on transition (Dodge et al., 2022; Keeling et al., 2020), broader engagement with life course approaches could significantly enrich our understanding of partner identities over time as well as how they are created. For military partners, key life transitions—marriage, parenthood, deployments, military-related separation, re-integration, and retirement—each represent turning points in identity formation (Segal et al., 2015). Indeed, different contexts can produce myriad, sometimes competing, identities resulting from “relational configurations” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). For example, the role of “mother” may become entangled with that of “military spouse,” reinforcing normative ideals of sacrifice, emotional labor, and support (Gray, 2023) and restricting the freedom some partners describe prior to motherhood (Gribble et al., 2019b). Military partners, therefore, experience multiple, complex relational configurations, navigating relationships with their spouse, their origin and created families, the military, and broader society, all of which influence and shape identity.

An additional consideration is that while much attention has been paid to the structural power of the military in shaping identity, there is growing recognition of partner agency, resistance, and creative negotiation as briefly touched on earlier. Drawing on the concept of “everyday forms of resistance” (Johansson & Vinthagen, 2019), military partners often engage in subtle acts of subversion or dissent that may not be immediately legible as political. Partners may “opt” to engage in acts of compliance with prescribed identities at times, leaning into the “good military wife” role when it is beneficial, and choose to resist and reject certain identities at other times

to regain agency, control, and independence (Cree, 2020b; Hansson et al., 2014; Hyde, 2024)—a “military” identity as Captain X’s wife may be salient and beneficial for partners at specific times, for example, when engaging with military welfare services (Gray, 2017; Hyde, 2017). At other times, a military identity may be viewed as cumbersome and something to be escaped, such as when partners believe they may be discriminated against when seeking civilian employment (Gribble et al., 2019b). Hyde (2024) and Gribble et al. (2019b) suggest that these forms of agency disrupt the binary of compliant versus resistant, instead revealing a spectrum of navigation strategies that partners opt to vary over time and across contexts. While evidence of resistance exists among military partners, the extent to which partners can fully exercise agency by actively “choosing” to enact a particular identity at a particular time still remains unclear. Such choices may be easier for partners who do not yet have children and, therefore, are less at the mercies of the doubled expectations of motherhood and the military, affording (greater) freedom and independence from the militarized portion of their lives for those not yet parents, and higher resistance to the “pull” of military rank hierarchies. Indeed, some of our participants without children describe the double-edge sword of this freedom through expressions of feeling distance from the military community as they are unable to access and build connections with other military families when this often centers around child-friendly events and coffee mornings during working hours (Gribble, 2017; Long, 2019; Senior, 2023; Ware et al., 2025). These nuances in perception and experience must be taken seriously in future research to avoid reductive dichotomies and bring to light the complex interplay of resistance, adaptation, and identity across multiple times and contexts.

The fluidity of identity is also supported by the fact that the assumption partner identities will “revert” to their premilitary status once personnel leave service or partners leave the relationship is not borne out in the research—after all, identity development is a lifelong experiment. The salience of a partner’s military identity can continue to be significant even after they leave the military community, for example, through their partner transitioning out of service (Spikol et al., 2024), in the case of divorce (Crowe-Urbaniak, Forthcoming), or as a care navigator during times of ill health (Senior, 2023; Senior et al., 2023). Military identity has been described by Munson and Daley (1999) as akin to an ethnicity, whereby the culture of the military enmeshes with an individual’s sense of self. This enmeshment and embedding of military identity during service can present difficulties for some veterans when they leave the military to transition back into a civilian life (Flack & Kite, 2021). Historically, there has been paucity of research examining military partners’ identity post-transition; however, recent research has highlighted the ways in which transition is similarly experienced by military partners, whose own identities may shift and change post-transition but which continue to be shaped and informed by military life and culture (Dodge et al., 2022; Keeling et al., 2020; Spikol et al., 2024). Further work is needed to untangle meaning-making for partners during the shift from “military” partner to “veteran” or “civilian” partner.

In this section, we begin to highlight how there is much to be learnt from finding ways to better recognize the complexity, multiplicity, and fluidity of how identity may be made sense of by partners across multiple life stages (McAdams, 2014), not least how partners may or may not negotiate the terms of their military-affiliation by adopting, resisting, and enacting agency through everyday military and civilian encounters. We encourage researchers to consider the ways in which their research might make space to explore how partners' sense of identity may change across different stages of the life course, at different times, taking into account temporal complexity (see Huddleston, 2024). This work likely requires researchers to move beyond methodologies which capture a snapshot in time and instead look to the potential that longitudinal life course methodologies or creative approaches may afford.

## **The (In)Visibility of Military Partners**

### *Obscuring Experiences Through Narratives of Operational Effectiveness*

Alongside exploding silos and increasing reflections of fluidity within identity over time, it is important that we recognize the (in)visibility of military partners among the military establishment, welfare providers, and society more broadly. In this section, we demonstrate the ways in which partners are rendered visible in particular contexts and ways of “knowing,” yet remain invisible, or at-least less known, in others, and invite the reader to consider ways in which their work may produce research that makes visible that which is presently less visible.

First and perhaps foremost, it is notable that partners are primarily recognized—and thus rendered visible—by military policymakers in relation to support of operational effectiveness (Ministry of Defence, 2022a), thus rendering them visible by the military only insofar as they contribute to military goals (Huddleston, 2025; Long, 2022b). Such institutional practices and welfare policy have been critiqued by scholars for positioning the civilian family as “subservient to the soldier and to the military as an institution” (Spanner, 2017, p. 486), with some declaring this approach as part of broader militarization of private life wherein family roles are incorporated into the operational goals of defense policy (Basham & Catignani, 2018; Enloe, 2000). The “instrumental recognition” of partners perpetuates a utilitarian model of family life that privileges military readiness over partner autonomy, producing and reproducing partner identity within the bounds of militarism. As researchers, we all note that many of our participants express gratitude at being able to share their experiences and have these “validated” and “heard,” sometimes for the first time, with someone who they feel appreciates and listens to their stories. However, some have also expressed frustration that their contributions may not lead to meaningful change for partners as the focus from, and remit of, military institutions, more often than not, remains on the serving person only.

In keeping with the attention policymakers have tended to pay toward operational readiness, military partners report often feeling greater acknowledgment and recognition from welfare providers, and the military more generally, during deployments (Long, 2022a, 2022b). Yet, they also report feeling forgotten during other experiences of military family life, particularly in terms of being recognized for the support they may provide during postdeployment re-integration (especially when dealing with mental and physical health challenges from deployment or otherwise), separation due to training exercises, short-term unaccompanied postings, and weekending (Gribble & Fear, 2022; Senior, 2023). Other challenges they may encounter that are not considered to be of direct support to the military, such as divorce, are also often overlooked by services (Crowe-Urbaniak, Forthcoming). Such reflections highlight the temporal and conditional nature of recognition of partners from within the institution—one that privileges the soldier's journey and operational readiness over the relational and emotional labor provided by partners (Harrell, 2000; Long, 2022b) and maintains the liminal and peripheral position of partners to the military and community (Gribble et al., 2019a). Partners are simultaneously part of the military, and arguably integral, while also positioned as superfluous and not a priority when it comes to their own welfare needs.

While research on cultural representations of military partners is limited within the United Kingdom, they are visible to an extent, although their portrayal is generally reductive. For example, in her analysis of the Military Wives Choir, Cree (2020a) argues that constructs of military partners often draw upon the figure of “Penelope”—one who is self-sacrificing and nurtures feminine ideals, which reinforces the notion publicly, and within the family, that it is the serving personnel who are the central figures, with military partners acting as their “helpmeets” through “service” and “sacrifice” (see also Cree, 2020b). Such portrayals obscure the diversity of military partners' experiences and identities and perpetuate gendered norms of emotional labor and caregiving. Through these portrayals, the labor of military partners becomes depoliticized and framed as an act of love for the serving person (and, therefore, country), no matter the cost (Gray, 2023).

This problematic positioning is demonstrated among partners who are caring for personnel experiencing mental or physical health challenges, where a collective identity of strength, resilience, and stoicism renders the labor of partners in their serving partners care and treatment as natural and, thus, invisible (Senior, 2023; Spikol et al., 2024; Stuttaford, 2020). Research has suggested this narrative of self-sacrifice and “resilience” operates to serve institutional interests by deflecting attention from the lack of inclusivity and inadequacy of support systems, while reinforcing ideals of self-sufficiency (Schott, 2022). Combined with the framing of partners as “personnel-plus,” this positioning can exacerbate the prioritization of the service person/veteran identity and needs over that of the partner to the detriment of partner mental health (Joseph & Afifi, 2010; Spikol et al., 2024), aligning increased rates of depression, anxiety, and social isolation among military partners managing the illness of their loved one (Phelan et al., 2011; Senior, 2023; Senior et al., 2023).

We might look to work by Alice Cree and Hannah West for ways in which a more critical and nuanced engagement with partners lived experiences may be achieved through research (Cree & West, 2023, Forthcoming). Using participatory theater-as-method alongside broader techniques of stagecraft, their research centered military spouses as *storytellers* and *critical subjects* with the capacity to speak in new and interesting ways about the military institution—and their relationship to it. In weekly online workshops, image theater, improvisation, and discussion-based activities were used to explore feelings and experiences that may otherwise have been difficult to verbalize. Importantly, the shared project of theater making necessitated that on-stage representation was not only a core concern, but the primary means of generating research data. Participatory theater methods enabled military spouses to craft the conditions of *their own* visibility and representation, which in turn generated new insights into the complex relations between their identities and broader cultural representations of military partners. These insights formed the basis of the collaboratively produced piece of theater based on the research, which actively sought to destabilize dominant tropes surround military partners, for example through the character of military wife and writer Penelope (“Pen”) who breaks free from an abusive relationship to create a new life for herself.

This research highlights the value of finding alternate methodological approaches for exploring the complexity and messiness of military partner identities, and of continuously questioning taken-for-granted categories and concepts in military research, see Basham and Bulmer (2017), including that of “representation.” We encourage future works to continue to explore creative ways in which military partners come to be seen, to be recognized, and to be understood by the military and the broader public, and the related effects this has on partners’ self-concept. Perhaps, such approaches will help to challenge reductive, militarized conceptualizations of their identities too.

### *Hidden Experiences and Intersectionality*

Finally, we reflect on how some military partners are rendered more or less invisible than others in research more generally. Through this discussion, we call for researchers to explore ways in which multiple partner experiences and identities may be better reflected in work by drawing on concepts of intersectionality.

Multiple axes of identity, such as gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability, interact with institutional structures—like the military—to shape lived experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). While gender has long been a central analytic to military sociology and feminist international relations (Duncanson, 2013; Enloe, 2000), military partner research, including our own, often lacks an intersectional lens, resulting in overly homogeneous conceptualizations of “the military partner” as white, heterosexual, middle-class, and female with biological children (Dowling et al., 2024; Gribble et al., 2020; Hyde, 2024). It is crucial that future work in this area focus on the experiences of those who are overlooked through the use of intersectional and interdisciplinary perspectives (Higate & Henry, 2004). While diversity



among military partners—including LGBT+ partners, minoritized ethnicities, single parents, male partners, and partners of reservists (Gribble et al., 2020)—is increasingly being recognized in emerging scholarship (Connelly et al., 2024; Dowling et al., 2024; Sullivan et al., 2021), the experiences of these populations and their connection with intersectional identity politics need further attention. To not take this seriously risks rendering significant social groups invisible and unrepresented in the overall military family research portfolio and more widely in policy and practice. Indeed, by not exploring ways to better hear these voices the academy becomes complicit in their silencing. But this does not mean we should just “add race and stir,” as argued by Foreman (2025), but instead critically consider the various power relations social bodies are entangled with and how these interact with military institutions and militarism at large. While we look for ways to include a wider range of voices in research, we must also sharpen our theoretical lenses to center discussions on, for example, eurocentrism, colonialism, class, and patriarchy among others. Such intersectional thinking will produce new insights into how identity is created and recreated within military contexts across diverse partners and families.

### *Future Directions*

So how might a more expansive approach to researching military partner identity be achieved? We challenge researchers to move beyond situational or contextual silos and engage more holistically with partner experiences in ways that move beyond inadvertently static conceptualizations within their work. The ways this may be realized are multiple and we do not want to be prescriptive in any recommendations. Indeed, we feel such endeavors require us, as researchers, to be more creative in our methodologies and more ambitious in how we draw upon multiple disciplinary fields to move beyond the confines of our own specialties. Throughout the article, we have attempted to direct the reader to think about what the present problems are, and we welcome engagement from our international colleagues around how these issues might be approached.

That said, as a starting point we might suggest that researchers look to develop more holistic and deeper understandings of identity and identity formation among military partners through longitudinal narrative methods that follow partners as they “enter” the military community until the point they leave and transition to civilian life. This would allow detailed mapping across the life course as identities flex, stabilize, and change in this population across multiple situational and contextual circumstances. Adoption of narrative approaches may also aid in understanding how partners themselves make meaning of their experiences in their own self-conceptualizations, and greater flexibility in this method may find a middle ground where past and future identities can be reflected upon (see Huddleston, 2024, for an example of this). Moreover, by centering a study of everyday lives, rather than just the “extremes” of deployment for example, would also allow for the granularity of partner experiences and how they shape identity to be emphasized (Felski, 2000;



Palmer & Gribble, Forthcoming). Although some care is needed here, as we should avoid producing an artificial sense of linearity or resolvedness through our methods, as identity-construction is messier and more complex than this (Bøe et al., 2023; Huddleston, 2024). Furthermore, co-production and arts-based research are additional means by which elucidation of identity formation could be encouraged to come to the fore via partners themselves. There is a growing body of work in critical military studies and beyond that mobilizes creative and participatory methodologies to better understand military institutions and people, including more “boundary” subjects such as partners and children (see Caddick et al., 2025; Cree, 2023; Steel, 2023; Watson et al., 2025; Woodward et al., 2025 for examples]. In the context of research on (and with) military partners, such approaches can attribute spouses with agency in “setting the agenda,” highlight key experiences meaningful to their identities, but also center complexity and messiness in the ways they navigate these identities (Cree & West, 2023).

While developing this thinking, we encourage researchers to reflect on their current methods and methodologies and adopt a more integrated and intersectional approach to challenge the dominant paradigms of military family research and promote more critical, inclusive, and socially just investigations (Baker et al., 2016; Ware, 2016). This would include the interrogation of stereotypical identities created and proscribed from within the community, which often pertain to their relationship with operational effectiveness. By leaning into a deeper appraisal of the meaning of various identity constructs, how they are created, and importantly, how they are resisted would be of value—as well as critique of how institutional cultures and epistemological assumptions shape which military families are studied, supported, and rendered (in)visible (Heiselberg, 2023; Spruce, 2019). Moreover, rethinking how military power and institutional structures operate in ways that construct, reinforce, and sometimes marginalize particular subjectivities for under-researched groups such as LGBT+ families, male partners, minoritized ethnicities, and dual-serving couples, would also help elucidate influences on identity formations among partners (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2020). Indeed, we would like to see more research that seeks to make visible the intersectional experiences of military partners in ways which highlight, attempt to confront, and intervene with the unequal power relations that they may be entangled with.

Finally, it is also essential to note that, particularly in qualitative work, participants create and recreate identities with researchers as part of their ongoing personal narrative construction (McAdams, 2011). As qualitative researchers, we are actively engaged in this process, and through our interactions with participants—guided by our particular methodologies—we are presented with the identity/ies that participants wish us to see. Furthermore, it is unlikely that linear narratives (e.g., those with a start, middle, and end) will resemble an objective reality (if there even is a reality to discover), and to attempt to construct one—as an individual or a researcher—risks “casting into the dark” life’s “complexity, unresolvedness, contradictions [and] indefiniteness” (Bøe et al., 2023, p. 584). Researchers should thus pay careful

attention to how their methodologies and positionalities may influence the co-construction of knowledge about identity that might manifest in their work.

## Summary

Through these reflections and our discussions, we have sought to understand how our own work understands and presents military partners' identities and have used this to outline core challenges to researchers working in the area of military partner identities. While particular to the U.K. context, our challenges to researchers are not—rather, they aim to expand and advance research on military partner identity on an international basis, through embracing more multiple, fluid, and nuanced conceptualizations and adopting deeper, more holistic interpretations of self. In particular, we call for research which embraces more creative, interdisciplinary, and longer-term approaches to provide additional insight into partners' complex life course. Finally, it is essential that such approaches adopt theoretical underpinnings which take seriously power as it pertains to class, race, ethnicity and sexuality, and are committed to better reflecting the voices of a wider demographic of military partners who continue to be overlooked in present research.

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## Author Biographies

**Rachael Gribble** is a lecturer in War & Psychiatry at King's College London, UK. Her research aims to understand how occupation influences the well-being of families, with a primary focus on the well-being of the partners and children of UK military personnel and veterans. To date, her work has covered military partner employment, family separation, intimate partner violence, partner health and well-being, relationship satisfaction, adolescent health and well-being within military families, reservist families, partner identity, and the parents of veterans using mixed methods approaches. He is also interested in the experiences of minority groups within the military, including the experiences of LGBT+ personnel and veterans.

**Donna L. Crowe-Urbaniak** is a lecturer in Law at Cardiff University, Cardiff, UK. As a socio-legal researcher, her research explores the impact of gender dynamics, familial roles, and the burden of caregiving when relationships break down. She is particularly interested in the experiences of military families. A key theme underpinning her research is the intersection of gender, law, and society.

**Alice Cree** is an academic track fellow at Newcastle University (NUAcT). Her research lies at the intersection of critical military studies and feminist geopolitics, with specific expertise in the use of creative methods to explore gendered military experience.

**Emma Senior** as an assistant professor, registered Adult Nurse, and Specialist Community Public Health Nurse (SCPHN) with more than 25 years of professional and academic experience, Emma brings a wealth of expertise in public health, workforce development, military families and the broader health and social care landscape. Her PhD research, *Military Spouses' Experiences of Living Alongside their UK Serving Partners During a Mental Health Issue*, was the first UK study of its kind. Using a biographical approach, her research highlights the challenges faced by military spouses, the protective factors that support relationships, and the impact on marital dynamics.

**Emma Huddleston** is a lecturer in Sociology based at the University of East Anglia (UK). Her research explores military family welfare, stigma, militarism, (in)securities, and gender, focusing on periods of deployment and life histories.