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The Impact of Military Lifestyle Demands on Well-Being, Army, and Family Outcomes

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Adopting M. Segal's framework, we focused on examining four military lifestyle demands—(1) risk of service member injury or death, (2) frequent relocations, (3) periodic separations, and (4) foreign residence—and their relationships to psychological and physical well-being, satisfaction with the Army, and marital satisfaction. Questionnaire results from 346 spouses living overseas indicated that the impact of separations was negatively related to all four outcomes, while foreign residence was negatively related to physical and psychological well-being, fear for soldier safety was negatively related to physical well-being, and the impact of moving was negatively related to satisfaction with the Army. The results further indicated that perceptions of moving and separations were more important in determining outcomes than were the actual number of moves or separations.

Keywords: *military family; well-being; separation; relocation; deployment*

Over the past half century, the military has experienced an increase in the number of soldiers who must strive to meet both the demands of their work and the demands of their families. Some of this increase is the result of societal trends such as the increase in the number of women, single parents, and dual-earner and

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dual-career couples in the workforce,¹ which have also taken place among those serving in the military.² This increase is also likely the result of the military's transition to an all-volunteer force and a view that military service is an occupation not a calling.³ Reviews of the research suggest that military work demands are related to family outcomes such as family member well-being, attitudes, and adjustment, as well as work outcomes such as soldier well-being, morale, and retention.⁴

In her now-classic work on the relationship between military and family institutions, M. Segal described a number of ways in which the demands of a military lifestyle may lead to negative outcomes for family members.⁵ Prominent among these are (1) geographic mobility, (2) residence in foreign countries, (3) periodic separations from family, and (4) risk of service member injury or death. Other demands include long and unpredictable duty hours, pressures for military families to conform to accepted standards of behavior, and the masculine nature of the organization. This article will focus on the first four demands, as focus groups conducted with spouses who pilot tested the survey indicated that these were their predominant concerns. Although some studies have examined the impact of these demands on health and well-being, they have typically included only one or two of these demands.⁶ This is unfortunate because, as M. Segal pointed out, it is the combined pattern of these demands that makes the military unique relative to other occupations, yet not everyone in the military will experience all of these demands at once.⁷ The purpose of the present study was to examine the relationships between these four military lifestyle demands and the reported well-being and Army- and family-related attitudes of military spouses who were living overseas and, in many instances, were separated from their spouses due to a peacekeeping deployment.

Geographic mobility. To accomplish the Army's mission, geographic mobility on the part of soldiers and their families is expected, and relocation occurs, on average, every two to three years.⁸ In the most recent Survey of Army Families (SAF IV), Orthner reports that in the twelve months prior to the SAF IV survey, 31 percent of Army spouses experienced a relocation with the frequency of relocation being highest among spouses of junior enlisted and company grade officers.⁹ These relocations can disrupt family life, friendships, and other supportive relationships in the present community and necessitate the seeking and development of new relationships in a new community.¹⁰ Although, for some spouses, moving can be a positive experience,¹¹ many report experiencing difficulty adjusting to their most recent move.¹² In the SAF IV survey, recently moved spouses reported less positive adjustments on thirteen out of eighteen family, personal, and Army adjustment indicators. Research in this area suggests that geographic mobility is related to lower psychological well-being,¹³ physical health,¹⁴ lower marital happiness,¹⁵ and lower retention.¹⁶

Foreign residence. Residence in a foreign country is a potential outcome of geographic mobility at some point in a soldier's career. As of 2003, approximately

15 percent of service members were stationed overseas.¹⁷ Residence in a foreign country can be problematic for family members as it requires significant adjustments to a new culture, language, and living conditions. Like geographic mobility, residence in a foreign country can be a positive experience;¹⁸ however, research also suggests that it can lead to lower well-being.¹⁹

Periodic separations. Geographic mobility and residence in a foreign country may be tied to separation from family as the soldier may be assigned to a unit that is likely to deploy and/or frequently travel. Soldiers can be separated from their families for several reasons, such as to go on field-training exercises, to attend school, or to deploy on a peacekeeping or combat mission. Separations can last from a few days to several months and are likely to be recurring. These separations can place additional demands on family members in terms of managing the household and taking on the role of single parent. They can also lead to feelings of isolation and loneliness. Some of the research on periodic separations has examined its impact by focusing on the frequency of separations,²⁰ while other research has focused on the hardships imposed on the family by separations.²¹ Generally, the research has shown a negative relationship between separations and well-being²² and between separations and marital satisfaction.²³ While the effects of deployment on marital and familial relationships reported are generally negative, positive effects may also occur. Generally speaking, research has indicated that there are spillover effects between job and family that can affect marital quality and job satisfaction.²⁴ Some of the research suggests that the direction of the outcomes may change in relation to the stage of deployment (pre, during, post).²⁵

Risk of injury or death. By its very nature, military service carries with it the risk of injury and death. This risk is most obvious during wartime, but it is also present during humanitarian and peacekeeping missions, as well as during field-training exercises. Approximately five hundred civilian wives of enlisted soldiers were surveyed regarding their soldiers' deployment to Somalia in 1993. Fears regarding soldier safety were one of the most cited problems regarding the deployment along with loneliness and ignorance of the Somalia situation. These fears were significantly correlated with rumors being considered as problems.²⁶

Fear is an aversive emotional state experienced in response to any threat to one's safety, security, or well-being.²⁷ In general, outcomes associated with fear include physiological arousal, nervous tension, efforts to escape or withdraw, and attempts to gain control.²⁸ Research conducted during the Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm) showed that military spouses do experience fear for the safety and welfare of their soldiers.²⁹ This and other studies of wartime fears have shown that spouse reports of such fears were related to their reports of health symptoms.³⁰ Other studies have found that negative health symptoms such as anxiety and depression can also occur during peacekeeping missions.³¹

Summary and Research Hypotheses

Given that the research has focused on the individual rather than the cumulative effects of these demands and has focused on different outcomes for each of these demands, it is difficult to ascertain which of these demands is most predictive of outcomes and which outcomes will be most affected by these demands. Based on the theoretical model proposed by M. Segal as well as the empirical literature, we expect that greater fear for the soldier's safety, a greater number of relocations and separations, and negative perceptions of relocation, separation, and living overseas will be associated with poorer physical and psychological health, less satisfaction with the Army, and lower marital satisfaction.³² The hypotheses are as follows:

Hypothesis 1a-d: Fear for the soldier's safety will have negative relationships with (a) psychological well-being, (b) physical well-being, (c) Army life satisfaction, and (d) marital satisfaction.

Hypothesis 2a-d: Impact of moving will have negative relationships with (a) to (d) above.

Hypothesis 3a-d: Impact of separations will have negative relationships with (a) to (d) above.

Hypothesis 4a-d: Impact of foreign residence will have negative relationships with (a) to (d) above. Because some research suggests that well-being and the other outcomes may be influenced by age and soldier rank, the hypotheses were tested both individually and after statistically controlling for these variables.³³

Method

Participants and Procedure

From March to June 2002, questionnaires were mailed directly to spouses whose service members were from the following units: Southern European Task Force in Italy, V Corps, 21st Theater Support Command, 1st Armored Division, and the 1st Infantry Division in Germany.³⁴ Some units, because of privacy concerns, chose to distribute the questionnaires to spouses themselves. A total of 3,886 questionnaires were mailed to the units and spouses. A total of 506 questionnaires were returned for a response rate of 13 percent.³⁵ From this larger sample, a subsample of spouses who reported at least one deployment was drawn. *Deployment* was defined as the spouse being away from home for thirty days or more on a combat, peacekeeping, or humanitarian mission. This subsample consisted of 346 (7 men and 339 women) ranging in age from eighteen to fifty-one years ($M = 30.41$, $SD = 6.36$) of which the majority were white (77 percent). African Americans accounted for 9 percent of the sample, Hispanics for 6 percent, Asians for 3 percent, and other 5 percent. Most were well educated, with 25 percent indicating that they graduated from college and another 15 percent indicating either some graduate training or a graduate degree. An additional 41 percent indicated having at least some college or technical training.

Measures

Control variables. Age, gender, number of moves, and number of deployments served as the control variables. Number of moves was measured by asking, "How many times have you moved during the time your spouse has been in the Army?" The number of separations was ascertained by asking, "How many times has your spouse deployed in his/her military career?"

Military lifestyle demand variables. Fear for soldier's safety was measured with four items: "I worry about my spouse being injured while on deployment," "I worry about my spouse being killed on a deployment," "There is a strong possibility that my spouse will be involved in combat during a deployment," and "Given my spouse's job in the military, there is a higher risk for injury or death during deployment." Impact of moving was measured with eight items: "Moving has had a positive impact on my family," "We move more frequently than I would like," "Moving has provided me with many positive opportunities," "Moving has allowed me to make new friends," "We have moved to exciting places," "Moving is difficult on our children," "One of the benefits of being a military spouse is getting to move," and "I like to move." Impact of separations was measured with four items including the following: "The separations from my spouse are stressful," "The number of deployments has put a strain on our family," "The number of deployments has hurt the stability of our marriage," and "I worry about the effects of my spouse's deploying on our children." Impact of foreign residence was measured by eleven items: "I like living in Europe," "I find the people in this country are very friendly to our Soldiers and families," "Since I have been living here, I feel isolated," "I am comfortable using the local language," "It has been difficult for me to make friends with others in the military community," "I like learning about this country," "I like to shop on the economy," "It has been difficult to make friends with the Germans/Italians," "I try to participate in this country's activities," "I can hardly wait to get back to the States," and "Being away from friends and relatives back home is very hard for me." All items for these measures were rated on a 5-point, Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*) and then scored and reverse scored such that a higher score indicates a higher or more negative standing on the variable of interest. That is, higher scores indicate greater fear and a more negative impact of moving, separations, and foreign residence.

Well-being variables. Well-being was measured in two ways. The Brief Symptom Inventory was used to assess psychological well-being. Participants were asked to indicate how much they were bothered or distressed by each of eighteen items over the past seven days.³⁶ Sample items include "feeling no interest in things" and "nervousness or shakiness inside." The response scale ranges from 1 (*none*) to

5 (*extreme*). Walter Reed Army Institute of Research's physical health symptom checklist was used to assess physical well-being. Participants are asked to indicate how often they experience each of twenty-two health symptoms during the past month. Sample items include "headaches," "eye/ear/nose problems," "stomach/intestinal problems," and "shortness of breath." The response scale ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very often*). For both measures, items were scored and reverse scored such that a higher value represented higher levels of well-being (i.e., fewer symptoms) and then averaged to create a composite score.

Army-related attitudes. Participants were asked to indicate how satisfied they were with each of five items. Items included the following: "The Army as a way of life," "The concern your spouse's unit has for families," "The respect the Army shows spouses," "How you would feel if your spouse were to make the Army a career," and "The kind of family life you can have in the Army." The response scale ranged from 1 (*very satisfied*) to 5 (*very dissatisfied*). Items were scored and reverse scored such that a higher value represented a more positive value on the variable (e.g., Army life satisfaction) and then averaged to create a composite score.

Marital satisfaction. Participants were asked to indicate how much they agreed with each of six items from Norton's Quality of Marriage Index.³⁷ Sample items include the following: "I have a good marriage," "I am happy in my marriage," and "I feel like I am part of a team with my partner." The response scale ranged from 1 (*strongly agree*) to 5 (*strongly disagree*). Items were scored and reverse scored such that a higher value represented a more positive value on the variable and then averaged to create a composite score.

To retain sample size, mean substitution of missing values was used.³⁸ Then, descriptive statistics were calculated for each of the variables (Table 1). The scale variables all had coefficient alphas at or above the .70 level that is recommended for research.³⁹

Results

Correlations

Correlations among all variables are presented in Table 2.⁴⁰ Consistent with the first hypothesis, fear for soldier safety was negatively correlated with psychological well-being, physical well-being, and Army satisfaction. However, fear for the soldier's safety was not related with marital satisfaction. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, impact of moving was negatively related to Army satisfaction. However, it was not related to psychological well-being, physical well-being, or marital satisfaction. Number of moves was actually positively associated with well-being and Army

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics (*n* = 346)

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Possible Range	Observed Range	Cronbach's Coefficient Alpha
Age	30.41	6.36	18-	18-51	NA
Soldier rank	8.91	6.78	(2-29) E1-010	(2-28) E2-08	NA
No. of moves	3.43	3.10	0-	0-33	NA
No. of separations	3.53	5.10	1-	1-40	NA
Fear for soldier safety	3.76	0.81	1-5	1.25-5	.81
Impact of moving	2.89	0.69	1-5	1.38-5	.82
Impact of separations	3.28	0.75	1-5	1-5	.70
Impact of foreign residence	2.63	0.68	1-5	1-5	.84
Psychological well-being	4.59	0.44	1-5	2-5	.88
Physical well-being	4.25	0.52	1-5	1.5-5	.86
Army life satisfaction	3.01	0.81	1-5	1-5	.82
Marital satisfaction	4.49	0.83	1-5	1-5	.97

satisfaction. As predicted by Hypothesis 3, impact of separations had negative relationships with psychological well-being, physical well-being, Army satisfaction, and marital satisfaction. Number of separations was not significantly related to outcomes. As proposed in Hypothesis 4, impact of foreign residence had negative relationships with psychological well-being, physical well-being, and Army satisfaction. Adjustment to foreign residence, however, was not related to marital satisfaction.

Regressions

After controlling for age, rank,⁴¹ number of moves, and number of separations the family had experienced, a series of two-step hierarchical regressions were calculated. Control variables were entered on the first step and the four lifestyle demand variables were entered on the second step. The results of these regressions are presented in Tables 3 through 6.

Well-being. Table 3 presents the results of the regression of psychological well-being on the control variables and the lifestyle demand variables. On the first step, the control variables accounted for 7 percent of the variance in psychological well-being, $R^2 = .07$, $F(4, 341) = 6.04$, $p < .01$. The addition of the lifestyle demand variables accounted for an additional 12 percent of the variance, $\Delta R^2 = .12$, $F(4, 337) = 11.79$, $p < .01$.⁴² An examination of the betas for the individual variables at this second step indicated that impact of separation and the impact of foreign residence each had significant negative relationships with psychological well-being. Thus, Hypotheses 3a and 4a were supported. Table 4 presents the results of the

Table 2
Correlations among Study Variables (*n* = 346)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
Age	—											
Soldier rank	.27**	—										
No. of moves	.46**	.28**	—									
No. of separations	.05	-.02	.07	—								
Fear for soldier safety	-.05	-.27**	-.15**	.12*	—							
Impact of moving	-.07	-.20**	-.03	.06	.20**	—						
Impact of separations	-.19**	-.11*	-.02	.04	.26**	.21**	—					
Impact of foreign residence	-.20**	-.18**	-.05	.08	.12*	.41**	.22**	—				
Psychological well-being	.23**	.16**	.14**	.02	-.16**	-.08	-.30**	-.29**	—			
Physical well-being	.01	.04	.04	-.04	-.15**	.02	-.15**	-.14**	.50**	—		
Army life satisfaction	.31**	.27**	.16**	.02	-.14**	-.32**	-.36**	-.29**	.34**	.16**	—	
Marital satisfaction	-.10	.09	-.03	.02	-.03	-.05	-.15**	-.08	.19**	.10	.20**	—

p* < .05. *p* < .01.

Table 3
Regression of Psychological Well-Being on Control and Lifestyle Demand Variables ($n = 346$)

	Step 1		Step 2		ΔR^2
	Beta	R^2	Beta	R^2	
Control variables		.07**		.18**	.11**
Age	.19**		.11		
Rank	.11		.05		
No. of moves	.03		.05		
No. of separations	.01	.04			
Lifestyle demand variables					
Fear for soldier safety			-.07		
Impact of moving			.09		
Impact of separations			-.22**		
Impact of foreign residence			-.24**		

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 4
Regression of Physical Well-Being on Control and Lifestyle Demand Variables ($n = 346$)

	Step 1		Step 2		ΔR^2
	Beta	R^2	Beta	R^2	
Control variables		.01		.06**	.05**
Age	-.02		-.06		
Rank	.04		.04		
No. of moves	-.04		-.02		
No. of separations	.03		.00		
Lifestyle demand variables					
Fear for soldier safety			-.12*		
Impact of moving			.14*		
Impact of separations			-.12*		
Impact of foreign residence			-.16**		

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

regression of physical well-being on the control variables and the lifestyle demand variables. On the first step, the control variables accounted for 1 percent of the variance in physical well-being, $R^2 = .01$, $F(4, 341) = .37$, ns . The addition of the lifestyle demand variables accounted for an additional 6 percent of the variance, $\Delta R^2 = .06$, $F(4, 337) = 5.23$, $p < .01$. An examination of the betas for the individual variables at

Table 5
Regression of Army Life Satisfaction on Control and Lifestyle Demand Variables (n = 346)

Beta	Step 1		Step 2	
	R ²	Beta	R ²	ΔR ²
Control variables	.13**		.27**	.14**
Age	.26**		.18**	
Rank	-.02		.02	
No. of moves	.01		.04	
No. of separations	.20**		.13**	
Lifestyle demand variables				
Fear for soldier safety			.02	
Impact of moving			-.20**	
Impact of separations			-.25**	
Impact of foreign residence			-.10	

*p < .05. **p < .01.

Table 6
Regression of Marital Satisfaction on Control and Lifestyle Demand Variables (n = 346)

Beta	Step 1		Step 2	
	R ²	Beta	R ²	ΔR ²
Control variables	.03		.06**	.03*
Age	-.14*		-.19**	
Rank	-.01		.02	
No. of moves	.03		.04	
No. of separations	.13*		.12*	
Lifestyle demand variables				
Fear for soldier safety			.04	
Impact of moving			.02	
Impact of separations			-.17**	
Impact of foreign residence			-.07	

*p < .05. **p < .01.

this second step indicated that fear for soldier’s safety, impact of moving, impact of separation, and impact of foreign residence each had significant relationships with physical well-being. Thus, Hypotheses 1b, 3b, and 4b were supported. Hypothesis 2b was not supported, because contrary to expectations, the relationship between

impact of moving and physical well-being was actually positive in sign and significant ($p < .05$).

Army-related variables. Table 5 presents the results of the regression of Army life satisfaction on the control variables and the lifestyle demand variables. On the first step, the control variables accounted for 13 percent of the variance in Army life satisfaction, $R^2 = .13$, $F(4, 341) = 12.87$, $p < .01$. The addition of the lifestyle demand variables accounted for an additional 14 percent of the variance, $\Delta R^2 = .14$, $F(4, 337) = 16.47$, $p < .01$. An examination of the betas for the individual variables at this second step indicated that impact of moving and impact of separation each had significant negative relationships with Army life satisfaction. Thus, Hypotheses 2c and 3c were supported.

Family-related variables. Table 6 presents the results of the regression of marital satisfaction on the control variables and the lifestyle demand variables. On the first step, the control variables accounted for 3 percent of the variance in marital satisfaction, $R^2 = .03$, $F(4, 341) = 2.37$, *ns*. The addition of the lifestyle demand variables accounted for an additional 3 percent of the variance, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $F(4, 337) = 3.04$, $p < .05$. An examination of the betas for the individual variables at this second step indicated that only impact of separation (beta = $-.17$) had a significant relationship with marital satisfaction. Thus, Hypothesis 3d was supported.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between military lifestyle demands and outcomes among family members. Adopting M. Segal's framework, we focused our attention on four military lifestyle demands: (1) risk of service member injury or death, (2) frequent relocations, (3) periodic separations, and (4) foreign residence.⁴³ Overall, the results of the bivariate correlations provided solid support for the hypotheses, as eleven of the sixteen relationships were significant. We sought to go beyond these simpler relationships and examine the combined patterns of demands while statistically controlling for other relevant variables (age, rank, number of moves, and number of deployments). The results of these analyses provided somewhat mixed support for our hypotheses.

Impact of separations was the one demand variable that was predictive of all the outcomes, thus suggesting that this is the most important of the four demands in determining how spouses are affected. Number of separations was not a significant predictor of all four outcomes, suggesting that it is the perception of the impact of the separations rather than the actual number that is key to determining how spouses will be affected. The actual number of separations does not necessarily influence the perception of the separation, but rather, it is the experience itself. For example, was

the separation at a particularly bad time? Did the separation cause the soldier to miss an important event? or Was the separation due to combat rather than a peacekeeping mission? It is also possible that given that 3.5 was the average number of separations, these spouses may have been at a point where they had learned to adjust to the process. Perhaps if it was the first separation, that would make a greater impact. Likewise, if it was the tenth separation, perhaps experiencing so many moves would make a greater impact. The frequency of the separations may also make a difference; were there three separations in one year or three separations in five years? Similarly, the same can be said for the number of moves and perceptions of moves. Moving was associated with two of the four outcomes, specifically physical well-being and Army life satisfaction. Living in a foreign residence was associated with both physical and psychological well-being, and fear concerning soldier safety was associated with physical well-being. Based on these findings, physical well-being was the outcome most susceptible to the influence of the military life demands, as it was the only variable predicted by all four demands. Psychological well-being and Army life satisfaction were predicted by two of the four demands followed by marital satisfaction, which was predicted by only one demand variable.

It is unclear why separations emerged as the demand most predictive of outcomes. Based on survey and interview data, a couple of possible explanations exist for this finding. First, it is possible that some spouses had the opportunity to adjust to moving and living in Europe. Thus, retrospectively, these two demands were not as significant to the spouses as they may have been at the actual time that they experienced the move. As for separations, some spouses were separated from their soldiers at the time that they completed the survey; thus, it was a more immediate effect for this small group. In addition, it is possible that even for those spouses whose soldiers were not currently deployed, separations had a more lasting effect than did moving or living in a foreign residence. However, when comparing spouses whose soldiers were deployed at the time of survey administration to those whose soldiers were at home, the findings indicate that both groups had similar perceptions of their well-being and their satisfaction with the Army and married life. With regard to fears concerning soldier safety, one possible reason that it was predictive of only one outcome is that while spouses did indicate strong concerns regarding their soldiers' well-being, at least 79 percent felt that their soldiers were well trained to handle such dangers, and interview data indicated that the level of fear was based on the location where the soldier was deployed. In this case, soldiers were deployed to a relatively safe environment, and thus, this combined with the confidence in training may partially explain the lack of an effect. In addition, perhaps spouses viewed the mission as legitimate and, thus, adjusted well.⁴⁴

Despite the strength of this study in looking at these multiple demands in an environment that lends itself to experiencing these demands either simultaneously or in close proximity to one another, a couple of limitations should be noted. First, as indicated in the methods section, our response rate was 13 percent, greatly limiting the

generalizability of the findings. Several factors may have contributed to the lack of response: (1) reliance on units to distribute the surveys with no direct method for the researchers to contact spouses and (2) failure to follow up phone calls with additional methods such as reminder postcards. The spouses who did respond generally were older, were well educated, were married to soldiers who were in the Army almost ten years, and were generally doing well, indicating that self-selection likely occurred. Thus, those who were younger and not doing as well did not seem to respond to this questionnaire. Anecdotal evidence from interviews with a subset of spouses who answered the questionnaires seems to confirm this possibility. Previous research that we conducted with Army spouses within the states has yielded varying response rates, with the lowest being 31 percent. Unfortunately, low response rates within the military population are still a problem.⁴⁵ Future research needs to continue to explore these relationships, not only for spouses living overseas but for those living in the states and for spouses of the other Armed Services.

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34. While we did not specifically ask spouses what their soldiers' military occupational specialties were, the units represented were diverse and included soldiers who were in Combat Arms, Combat Support and Combat Service Support positions.

35. The response rate may be slightly higher since, in some cases, we had to rely on the units to distribute the questionnaires, and it is possible that not all were distributed. However, we are making the assumption that all surveys provided to the units were given to the spouses.

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40. As can be seen in Table 2, the Pearson's correlations for number of separations did not yield significant results, yet for the outcomes in Tables 5 to 7, the betas for number of separations were significant. The betas in the regression analysis reflect the relationships between the independent and the dependent variables while controlling for all of the other predictor variables in the model, whereas with the Pearson correlations, the other independent variables are not controlled for, thus resulting in different outcomes.

41. We reran the analyses replacing the continuous rank variable with years of service, and the findings were similar. In addition, we reran the analyses using enlisted and officer as dichotomous rank variables and still had similar findings.

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