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### Long Distance Military and Civilian Relationships: Women's Perceptions of the Impact of Communication Technology and Military Culture

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# Long Distance Military and Civilian Relationships: Women's Perceptions of the Impact of Communication Technology and Military Culture

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This qualitative study investigates military female partners' perceptions of communication technologies during long-distance relationships, contrasted with civilians' experiences. Military female partners in this sample included both female civilians and female military members whose male partners were deployed for wartime military-related service. Purposive iterative sampling of military cases and contrast civilian cases were done of women prior to and after current cyberspace-based communication technologies became widely available. Post-1980s' predeployment expectations of communication frequency and dependability were commonly not met. Pre-1980s' expectations were more aligned with reality, although not necessarily less stressful. Perspectives of military partners across eras suggested that weaknesses/gaps in communication pose higher risk to relationship resilience for younger military partners and those more distal from military culture and support services.

**Keywords:** Women, military families, deployment, communication, cyberspace, technology, long-distance relationships, feminism, marriage, relationship maintenance

During the past decade, growing awareness of the long-term effects of overseas military assignments on service members, veterans, and their families has underscored the need to provide them with a wide range of support services before, during, and after their deployments. To a far greater extent than in the past, the government recognizes that the support of family members is critical to military personnel's ability to carry out their missions and make a successful transition to civilian life (Harris, 2011; Hawes, 1997). Despite this renewed interest in the military family (Booth, Segal, & Bell, 2007) and recognition of the interdependence among military family members, (Wadsworth et al., 2013; Segal, 1986), military families continue to endure challenges that threaten their survival and successful functioning.

For example, the incidence of domestic violence and divorce in the military has been associated with the deployment cycle (DuMars, 2013). Although the U.S. military

divorce rate slightly declined in 2012, it steadily increased from 2001 to 2011 (Bushatz, 2013). Researchers have also found that successive, lengthy deployments and deployment extensions are associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and polytrauma (Tanelian & Jaycox, 2008), conditions which often lead to or exacerbate relationship stress (Carter et al., 2011; McCubbin & Dahl, 1976; Moelker & van der Kloet, 2006). Thus, shorter and less frequent deployments may be responsible for the slight decline in divorce rate from 2011 to 2012 (Bushatz, 2013).

Research on military families and dual-career couples (May, 1991; McCubbin & Dahl, 1976; McCubbin, Dahl, Lester, Benson, & Robertson, 1976; Sahlstein, 2006; West, Mercer, & Altheimer, 1993; Wild, 2003) also suggests that while time and space variables contribute to greater emotional distance between couples, and the attenuation and termination of relationships, these variables *alone* have not been found to be linearly predictive of relationship outcome (Anderson & Emmers-Sommer, 2006; Cameron & Ross, 2007; Kidenda, 2002; Maguire, 2001; Rowe, Murphy, Wessely, & Fear, 2013; Whitty & Gavin, 2001). Therefore,

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developing a more complex understanding of intimate relationships within military families is an important factor in creating effective support services.

Recognition of the cultural distinctions among civilian and military populations with regard to the underlying beliefs, values, and norms specific to military culture is another key component in successful program development (Harris, 2011). Cultural values, such as the importance of hierarchy and rank, the emphasis on "mission first," and prioritizing the needs of the country and group ahead of one's individual desires, can be detrimental to intimate relationships and may create barriers to accessing supportive services. However, little attention has been paid in the literature to how factors such as military culture lead to heightened or diminished relationship resilience (Rowe et al., 2013). For the purpose of this study, relationship resilience is defined as maintenance of perceived level of intimacy during the long-distance phase of the relationship (Mari-gold, Holmes, & Ross, 2010; Murray & Holmes, 1999).

Although the U.S. military has long explored various means to enhance distance communication between partners in order to support families in times of deployment (West et al., 1993), there is a large gap in the literature on how the use of such distance communications affects relationship resilience, especially in the context of military culture and in comparison to civilian long-distance relationships. Research on military couples and other long-distance relationships has primarily focused on the predictors of duration of separation, the intensity of stressors precipitating the separation, and the effect of geographical distance, rather than how differences in the patterns or methods of communication between couples affect their relationships (Kidenda, 2002; Maguire, 2001; Sarch, 1993; Wood, Scarville, & Gravino, 1995). Due to the increased use and availability of new technologies, the documented social impact of technology on relationships (Hostetter & Busch, 2006; Rabby, 2007), and the role of cyberspace as a spatial and relational community (Chaplin & Ruby, 2005; Gross, 2006; Jackelen, 2005), understanding the role that telecommunications play in both proximal and distal phases of military relationships has been identified as an understudied area in need of exploration (Carter et al., 2011). Further, the extent to which contemporary telecommunications affects long-distance relationships differentially within the military and civilian culture across conflict eras has not been fully investigated, particularly from the perspective of female partners; this issue is the focus of the current study.

Applying this perspective is also important because prior investigations of the factors that influence military relationships have primarily examined them from the perspective of the deployed, predominantly male, military family member (Carter et al., 2011; Cigrang et al., 2014; Aguirre, Smith-Osborne, & Granvold, 2012). In light of the increased number of married personnel and dual military

career partners in today's all-volunteer force (AVF; Smith-Osborne, 2012), the female partners' perspective now needs to be reconsidered in the development of more effective interventions.

The relationship among gender, spatiality, and the use of communication tools has long received attention (Bourdieu, 1989; DeCerteau, 2002; Foucault, 1986; Gilligan, 1978, 1982, 1990, 1994; Rakow, 1988; Spain, 1992, 1993; Weston, 2002; Woolf, 1929; Zukin, 1991), for example, around such issues as preparation for and comfort with the use of computers in the work world, including the military (Edwards, 1990; Kramer & Lehman, 1990; Zimmerman, 1983). There are a plethora of studies examining female military spouses and of female military or civilian spouses' reactions to occupationally driven separation (see reviews such as Aylor, 2003; Bell & Schumm, 2005; Lester et al., 2010; Merolla, 2010b; Riggs & Riggs, 2011; Vormbrock, 1993). However, there has been limited research which investigates women's perspectives on the impact of remote communication, in general (Haraway & Goodeve, 2000; Kidenda, 2002; Maguire, 2001; Perry & Greber, 1990; Rothschild, 1983), or cyberspace-based and other communication technologies, in particular, on the maintenance of long-distance relationships in civilian compared with military contexts (Boneva, Kraut, & Frohlich, 2001; Holmes, 2004; Merolla, 2010a).

This article presents the results of an exploratory qualitative study that investigated female military partners' perceptions of the gendered impact of communication technologies on relationship resilience and contrasts these perceptions with those of civilian partners in long-distance relationships. Through qualitative inquiry, this study provides some initial insights into the complexity of long-distance relationships mediated through communication technologies. It adds to the literature on the impact of technology on vulnerable relationships in military families by examining questions of gender, power, and communication in different contexts. Finally, it aims to enhance our understanding of the impact of technology on military families' relationships in order to support them more effectively in program design and implementation.

## METHOD

This is an exploratory qualitative study that used some grounded theory methods to guide its thematic data analysis (Creswell, 2012). The study was approved by the institutional review boards of the researchers' respective universities. A total of 13 participants were included in the study. Participants were adult, Caucasian females, age 18 and older, who had experienced long-distance relationships at some time. Initially, two groups of participants were sampled, including six women who had long-distance military relationships. Three of the six women had relationships in

the 1970s and earlier (during the Vietnam draft era), before computer-based communications technology became widely available, and the other three women had long-distance military relationships from the 1980s to the present (AVF era). One of the 1970s' era women and her partner had initially been separated for educational reasons and then by the draft. Two of the three women in the later cohort were also veterans themselves. These interviews produced strikingly similar results regarding the major themes of the research, indicating that saturation had been achieved (Gilgun, 2012; Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Padgett, 1998). Following these initial interviews with women involved in long-distance military relationships, additional purposive sampling was done to challenge existing constructs by searching for contrast cases (Gilgun, 2012; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This step involved interviewing women in civilian long-distance relationships, who had been separated for educational or employment reasons, to confirm the themes identified in the initial interviews with women in long-distance military relationships. Seven women with experience in long-distance relationships (one with a civilian partner in the Vietnam era, five with civilian partners after the 1980s, and one with both civilian and military partners in both eras) were thus added to the sample. All participants were affianced and/or in intimate cohabiting relationships when not in long-distance phase, but not all were married. Three of the military partners and two of the civilian partners were also parents with their long-distance partner during the period investigated. The remaining individuals were separated from partners over a prolonged period (greater than four months) for employment reasons—either military deployment or employment relocation in a dual-career situation.

At the time of initial contact, potential participant addresses were requested. A letter of invitation and consent, with permission to recontact for follow-up, was mailed or e-mailed to each participant prior to interview. After giving consent, participants were interviewed at their convenience by telephone. Interviews utilizing a semi-structured interview guide (see the appendix) lasted 45 to 90 minutes. The two researchers took detailed notes during telephone calls.

After both sets of interviews, data were independently coded through an open coding process by the two members of the research team. As part of this process, phrases and ideas from the data were conceptualized through a labeling process, and memos and diagrams were sorted and used to give meaning to the identified concepts and their interrelatedness. This open coding process led each researcher to arrive at substantive codes. After these core concepts were identified by each researcher independently, they were discussed, compared, and synthesized by the authors. Then, as part of the selective coding process, memos and diagrams were sorted to identify cross-relationships and to further

integrate and refine categories. Properties, dimensions, and interactions that could add depth and explanation to the emerging themes were identified during selective coding. When no new properties or dimensions appeared, the themes that had been identified through the coding process seemed to account for much of the variability in the findings. Thus, the researchers considered the data to be saturated and did not add new cases (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

In addition, content analysis of interview transcripts was done by the first author using Atlas.ti 5.2 software within a Windows environment to code transcripts a third time and determine frequency of terms for key concepts across interviews.

Codes were discussed until consensus was reached by both coders, and patterns of themes were then identified and clustered to understand the data more fully (Denzin, 1989). Last, participants were contacted again for member checking to clarify emergent themes. This process identified four major themes, which were consistent regardless of the type of relationship in which respondents were involved or the era in which the relationships occurred: (1) diverse methods of communication serve distinct relationship functions and can support relationship resilience; (2) the costs of and access to communication tools influence the power dynamics within relationships; (3) culturally constructed gendered norms exist in cyberspace; and (4) perception of community belonging, age, and acculturation to context influence relationship resilience. To provide evidence of saturation, subthemes are presented under each theme in the results section that follows (Bowen, 2008).

## RESULTS

### Theme 1: Diverse Methods of Communication Serve Distinct Relationship Functions, and Support Relationship Resilience

#### *Subtheme 1: Long-Distance Relationships Increased Participants' Use of Communications Technology and the Range of Technology They Used*

Participants across all groups identified the frequency, depth, and intensity of communication as important contributors to the level of intimacy they perceived in their long-distance relationships. Different types of communication technology were associated with different types of intimacy and relationship functions. Not surprisingly, according to content analysis of the interview transcripts, the primary means of communication evolved from letters, long-distance phone calls, greeting cards, audiotapes, and mailed gift items (e.g., photos, love beads, lapel pins, cartoons, and drawings) during the 1970s to cell and satellite

phone calls, cell phone text messaging, electronic greeting cards, e-mails, e-mailed digital photos, instant messaging, and webcam chats in more recent years.

*Subtheme 2: Lack of Access to Technology  
by Either Partner Limited the Intimacy  
of the Relationship*

They recognized, however, that forms of technology that could be used more frequently (such as brief telephone calls in situations allowing frequent cell phone use) would convey more shallow communications but were, nevertheless, important means to convey the details of everyday life. By contrast, less frequent but more “special” communications methods often conveyed more depth and therefore increased perceived intimacy and enhanced the experience of sharing each other’s life. Participants’ comments were quite clear about this distinction and reveal how, over time, different means of communication were used to express similar sentiments.

During the 1970s, regular postal mail (i.e., “snail mail”) and phone calls were the most common forms of communication; each served its own unique purpose, as a military spouse in the Vietnam era noted:

Both of us sent cards and letters; he sent love beads and photos. I remember sending one photo of myself with a snowman making the peace sign; he expressed confusion as to what he was doing there. We had two tape recorders, so I would sit and record a conversation with myself and then mail it to him, and he responded by taping a response in his barracks, and his friends would talk too. It would take two weeks for one conversation to be recorded. The tapes were very important: being able to physically talk to the person and have a dialogue. You could sit there and be more spontaneous, talk as things came into your mind—easier to express something than writing letters, even though making a tape of a one-sided conversation. When you are apart you need to share small things. Couples can do that now with texting and cell phones—we do that when he is on the road driving his semi.

A 1970s’ era civilian partner confirmed:

Long-distance phone calls were highly anticipated, and we tried to schedule them regularly and well ahead of time, as they were brief and sometimes difficult to access due to shared landlines. But letters, in a way, were more intimate (although one-sided), since more thought could be put into them and therefore more depth. Also letters were more private and less rushed, without the chance that others were overhearing our conversation or waiting impatiently for us to get off the phone, and without the high cost.

Similarly, a woman in a more recent military relationship said:

E-cards were animated things to brighten each other’s day. The webcam was the most valuable tool, even though it was frustrating when it didn’t work. [The webcam] made it a lot easier to feel connected because we could see each other, so we were more part of each other’s lives—it was more intimate.

A woman in a civilian long distance relationship agreed:

We did letters once a week and phone calls daily. I would read them over and over and think about what I would write back. More time and effort was put into a letter. They were treasured. It took more thought and purposeful action to write the letter, and you could see it more than once. Probably phone calls were more important to maintaining the relationship because you could hear the tone of voice and have a complete conversation.

*Subtheme 3: Participants Adapted to New Forms  
of Communications Technology to Maintain the  
Intimacy of Their Relationships*

Women who had different types of relationships in different eras sought to forge or strengthen bonds of intimacy in new ways as communications technology evolved. The availability of new forms of technology affected their ability to maintain the intimacy of their relationships. A civilian woman noted:

We wrote regular letters in the first [long-distance relationship], but all by phone with the second. Cards were sent more when in person and were more meaningful. With IM [instant messaging], we could be intimate; kind of strange, but felt normal. I banned myself from IM because I found it very addictive, so eliminated it.

Although the women used different types of media, they all reported that their contact with partners, of whatever frequency, supported the resilience of their relationship, albeit in different ways. Frequent contacts provided a component of familiarity while infrequent contacts sustained the relationship by enhancing relationship depth and intimacy.

**Theme 2: Costs of and Access to Communication  
Tools Influence Perceived Relationship Power  
Dynamics**

In addition to commenting on the distinct functions that different forms of communication played in sustaining long-distance relationships, all participants identified access to communication tools as an important factor in determining which partner had greater access to and control over various forms of technology and, consequently, more influence over their frequency and type of contact. Sometimes this translated into greater control for the partner with more money, the one who had purchased the technology, or in the case of military families, the deployed partner whose

ability to access the technology was limited by circumstances.

*Subtheme 1: Financial Control Over Costs of Technology Led to a Power Imbalance in the Relationship*

As the following comments indicate, during the past several decades the nature of monetary costs shifted from expensive long-distance phone calls to cell phone purchases. One woman who had a long-distance relationship with her military fiancé in the 1970s, then a civilian partner in the same era, observed:

Long-distance contact was a big deal then because long-distance phone calls were expensive. He made almost all of the calls, so his parents paid for them. His family had a lot of money and never remonstrated with him to get off the phone or cut back on the phone bill, but I was aware of this issue and tried to be considerate by not talking too long.

A similar pattern appeared even as cell phones replaced long distance calls. Each member of the sample reported that cell phones were purchased and bills paid by the male partner for the female partner. Participants remarked specifically on how this influenced the power balance in their relationship. The military long-distance relationships, and attendant cell phone arrangements, were seen to be associated with occupational requirements of high social value within a "greedy institution" (Segal, 1986)—one which demands the individual's primary commitment of time, energy, and loyalty. One civilian participant stated:

My first fiancé got me a cell phone. We would call a lot; we were always on the cell phone. He was wonderful long distance on the phone, but completely different face to face. He was depressive and we had a very difficult time, although we stayed engaged. I finally rented a place in [her preferred location] and was ready to start classes the next day. He phoned after returning to [his current home] and demanded I come there. I broke it off.

Another civilian post-1980s' participant was even more explicit about the effects on the power dynamics in the relationship:

With the cell phone, he called me more . . . he had more power; he controlled my cell phone bill; that showed a lot of issues after we broke up. I bought the webcam and had more control [over its use]. Never ever get a cell phone under your boyfriend's name. The power dynamic is very dangerous. You should always have a fair monetary split, and each person should have an understanding of how much things cost.

In contrast, another post-1980s' combined military and civilian participant, whose relationship was not influenced by cell phone use, commented:

We each paid our own phone bill and alternated visits to balance gas costs, and Internet use was not a cost issue. Access was not so much an issue, except phones when I lived in a sorority house and several of the girls had long-distance boyfriends. We did not have cell phones until our last year of college. So we just coordinated; money was not a real barrier.

*Subtheme 2: Differential Access to Technology Affected Power Structure of Relationship*

In military relationships, the limited access of the service member to technology indirectly gave men more control of communication with their partners and could strain their relationships, as indicated in this post-1980s' young (and living off-post) military partner's comment:

I had to be home a lot so I did not miss communication. It was impossible to plan for it because if I had to go to the store and I missed him, I would feel horrible. And I never could tell when he would be online—just whenever he could, so no set time, no way to plan. All hours of the day, all hours of the night.

Nevertheless, military respondents, especially those who were older and more acculturated to the military, accepted this pattern as a necessary feature of military life, as indicated by an older military wife who herself had served previously:

He couldn't do what he needed to do unless he could see we were all functioning back home.

Another younger post-1980s' military wife added:

Yes, [this type of long-distance relationship had disadvantages for me as the female spouse] because there was not much time to talk over family issues and I felt reluctant to burden him.

Costs associated with purchasing technology and differential access to its use also had an impact on the power dynamics in relationships and often made women from all cohorts feel that they possessed less power or ability to take initiative in the relationship. The partner who purchased the technology perceived having, and was perceived as having, more control. The women in military relationships, however, were more accepting of this power dynamic because of their acculturation into the behavioral norms of military life (including the fact that the cell phone/communication expenses are an occupational necessity rather than discretionary spending), and the expectation that the needs of the mission and their deployed family member who was

implementing that mission took priority over their own problems, as described in the previous comments. Therefore, the power balance on this issue was perceived differently within military relationship contexts.

### Theme 3: Perceived Independence and Social Space Dynamics Influence Relationship Quality

Participants across the groups studied perceived social space dynamics, including the amount of physical distance, the social meaning and ownership of different spaces inhabited both while together and apart, and the level of difficulty involved in bridging distance, as a significant factor in relationship maintenance and quality. These factors were present not only during but also before and after the long-distance phase of the relationship. The emergent theme of women's independence as an important factor in the quality of the long-distance relationship was tied to her sense of ownership of her own space and place. Ironically, although the women in military relationships accepted the subordination of their needs to those of their spouses in the interest of supporting the "mission," they were also able to establish and maintain a greater sense of independence in the context of a long-distance relationship.

One participant, who met her future husband while she was in high school and continued a casual relationship while they went to different colleges and then became engaged when he was drafted and deployed to Vietnam, remarked:

Casual dating and distance was not such a bad thing. It let you be with friends and be who you wanted to be. There was a date night and a friend night and no pressure to 'have a man' all the time. I still travel with my high school girlfriends extensively; we have a close women's network.

Commenting about a similar experience, another participant stated:

The focus of our lives was on college and [in his case] the war; there was not even a TV in the college lounge. You were in an isolated, education oasis. You did not exist in the community, just at the university in your own little world. Nothing exists beyond there, unless it was a big event like the first moon walk. You felt your world existed in a very small area . . . and I did not go out of my way to leave it; I did not have a car. His mother did not drive, and they only had one car; his father could not take off work [to visit their son when he was recovering from combat injuries in a distant hospital]. You lived in your perimeter and networked in your space.

Another participant in a military relationship similarly commented that after her boyfriend (later husband) transferred to a different college,

the change was hard, but we appreciated the independence and the times together. There were some advantages of a long-distance relationship: We got to make separate friends and it decreased clinginess, especially for me, by getting involved in organizations [since we were not spending time just together]. I certainly had developed independence partly due to the change to long distance. I, in particular, was secluding us before. I feel like I grew during that time because I was able to find the activities I wanted to be involved in and not feel it would take away from time I could otherwise spend with him. And having been apart in college let me know we could do it, so it didn't freak me out [when after we married his career took him to Iraq as a civilian contractor for two to four months at a time].

However, both a Vietnam-era civilian participant and a later-era civilian participant in an intimate relationship separated for educational reasons identified contradictory experiences in this regard:

I found that being in a [long-distance] relationship was much easier because I could manage my time between my personal time with my friends and relationship better. I could be camping with my friends and be on a hike and still be talking to him [on a cell phone]. When I moved back, it was more difficult and more frustrating because our times weren't aligned. [However, the relationship contributed to] me not ever really getting into the culture of [my original college town] because I spent all my time . . . my social fun . . . was on the [cell] phone with him. I didn't make as big an effort to meet other people. It was a choice. By choice, I was choosing him. I wonder if my perception of the college would have been different if I had been without a boyfriend, if I would have gotten more connected with the campus. I would have been more optimistic, more open to new things if I weren't connected to a [long-distance] boyfriend. [post-1980s' civilian participant]

A long-distance relationship phase had some advantages for both of us in preserving independent time, especially for me as a minority female in a majority male situation to be able to focus on my personal achievement goals in that demanding, competitive environment. But it was more difficult to maintain my autonomy as the female in the relationship once we [were] back in same space full time due to subtle social expectations and pressures about the subordination of my time and my career to his. . . . Those just didn't manifest the same way when we were each doing our jobs in separate spaces and times. [1970s'-era participant]

### Theme 4: Age and Acculturation to Context Influences Relationship Resilience and How Women Use and Perceive Communications Technology

Women in military relationships differ from their civilian counterparts because they have to adapt to the shared attitudes, values, goals, and practices of the institution even as they struggle to balance the complexities of a long-distance relationship (Reger, Etherage, Reger, & Gahm, 2008). These shared values and norms include

patriotism; conservative social beliefs; an expectation of self-sacrifice; the prioritization of the needs of the group and the mission over those of the individual; a belief that weakness is bad and that the display of emotion is a sign of weakness (Moore, 2011; Moore & Kennedy, 2010). In addition, there is an acceptance of the importance of hierarchy and rank as fundamental to effective day-to-day functioning.

The impact of length and therefore degree of acculturation into the military context was reflected in the comments of the women studied regarding their use of communication technologies with their partners. Perspectives of military partners across eras suggested that weaknesses/gaps in communication pose higher risk to relationship resilience for families with younger military partners and those more distal from military culture and support services. One partner, whose military relationships spanned decades, spoke on the evolution of her understanding of communication with her partner:

He didn't need to handle regular home life stressors because they can't deal with it. As a young twenty-year-old, I didn't see that. I do now. Twenty years ago, I did not know what I was getting into. I think the military should do more for enlisted wives, maybe information and guidelines about lifestyle choices and pitfalls, like what is appropriate to talk about with deployed spouse and not.

Another older, long-term military wife discussed her husband's military versus family focus:

When I did not hear from him, it was because he wanted to stay focused on his troops and the mission at hand and not be distracted by home issues and emotions. When he got back it took usually three months to adapt back to the family pace and life.

The need to adapt to the unique institutional subculture of the military, therefore, imposed additional expectations and demands on women's long-distance relationships beyond those created by financial considerations or other power dynamics.

## DISCUSSION

Like all studies, particularly those with a small sample, this study has certain limitations. The participants were a purposive homogeneous group of White, middle-class women. Power and gender in relationships, and the use of telecommunications in relationships, may differ greatly in other groups, especially due to relative access to telecommunications equipment. Nevertheless, the impact of cybertechnology on long-distance personal relationships in military context compared to civilian context has rarely been

examined. This exploratory study thus makes a contribution to this emergent literature.

This study's findings suggest that women's access to and initiative in using communications technology and its impact on long-distance relationships may be influenced in complex and often ambiguous ways by several factors, including control of the resources that pay for the technology, acceptance or rejection of traditional gender roles, and the effects of institutional cultural norms and values (Byrne & Findlay, 2004; Horstmannshof & Power, 2005; Pettigrew, 2007; Smith-Osborne & Felderhoff, 2014; Wei, 2007). Emergent themes from this study suggest that when male partners controlled access to the means of communication and the initiative in their use, behaviors that were reinforced both by the military's institutional social norms and the men's economic dominance, they also controlled, limited, and were more active in defining the couple's long-distance relationship (Shipman & Kay, 2009; Sprecher, 1985). Yet by modifying their expectations of the relationship as part of their adaptation to military culture, the women in these military relationships maintained a sense of personal independence, although they did not have a sense of control over the relationships themselves. In other words, cultural norms and expectations mediated their ability to sustain a long-distance relationship.

Globalization theory and related literature suggest that contemporary advances in communications technology are associated with the potential expansion of an individual's social space (Clough, 2009; Kellner, 2002; Wei, 2007). The theory posits that the speed and pace assumed as a consequence of the continuous development and modernization of technology—and the modernization of technology itself—must affect the ways in which relationships develop, the roles partners assume, and the balance of power these roles reflect. The theory largely relies on ideas based in social constructionism, specifically that different realities are constructed in different cultural contexts. Although the new space created by cyberspace may be construed as the opposite of the "real world," when examining socially constructed entities such as power, structure, and politics, cyberspace is very real because it has the power to shape perceptions (Fernandez, Wilding, & Wright, 2002). This space may take different forms depending on the cultural context in which it is applied, as well as the salience of occupational risk associated with the cause of the geographic separation. This study has examined the comparison of the forms this space can take in military and civilian relationship cultural contexts when the relationship is being conducted primarily at a distance and is, therefore, mediated by communication media.

Participants' comments illustrated different perceptions of how social space changed in the course of communicating long distance with their partners. All participants noted the differences in intensity and intimacy between in-person relationships and those mediated by technology, although



they had varying opinions about the causes and nature of the differences. These ranged from biologically based gender differences in communication style to specific characteristics of their relationships. With respect to the latter, several women identified the duration of the relationship and the level of commitment before the long-distance, technology-mediated phase as critical factors which affected the differential impact of technology on the long-distance phase. In addition, they identified qualities of affect, emotional tone, and responsiveness, and how these were conveyed differentially over various media, as influential in the quality of the technology-mediated relationship. These findings are consistent with those of related studies by Sahlstein (2006), Utz (2007), and Rabby (2007), but inconsistent with some studies of exclusively online relationships (Pauley & Emmers-Sommer, 2007; Wildermuth & Vogl-Bauer, 2007) which failed to support differences in relationship satisfaction or intimacy based solely on media selection.

This study brings to light power differentials in relationships that are often seen as “invisible” because they are not physical but rather exist in cyberspace (Averett & Burton, 1996; Goldin, 1995; Lefebvre, 2004). It also underscores how long-distance relationships are mediated and transformed by technology and that clinicians who are working with individuals in these relationships need to expand their awareness of the importance of technology in people’s lives.

To build on this research, future studies could engage in purposive sampling of a larger and more diverse cohort of women who experienced similar long-distance relationships and of women who experienced both peacetime and wartime military-related long-distance relationships since the 1990s, when the current communications boom began. In addition, women’s voices from diverse ethnic and class groups with different cultural norms and values need to be heard, particularly as the demographic composition of the all-volunteer armed forces changes. More inclusive qualitative, mixed methods, and quantitative work will also be needed to enhance our understanding of the experience of women in technology-mediated relationships. Military researchers should examine the continued social construction of cyberspace and the differential power dynamics within it.

Several emotional and mental health support programs, such as the Army Strong Bonds program, the Family Advocacy Program, the Family Support Center, the Family Assistance Center, and private counseling are currently offered through the U.S. military. While there is considerable participation in these programs, they remain underutilized. Military research that continues to examine how long-distance relationships are affected by new forms of communication technology is necessary to support the profession’s efforts to maximize the agency of both the women and men with whom we work and to create the social supports and professional interventions all members of military families

need to help them maintain long-distance relationships with deployed family members. These programs could strike a balance between addressing the needs of service personnel and their missions and those who are left behind to wait for their return.

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## APPENDIX: WOMEN'S PERSPECTIVES ON THE IMPACT OF COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY ON LONG-DISTANCE RELATIONSHIPS: INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. You have been asked to participate in this study because you have had experience in a long-distance relationship. Could you tell me a little about that?

[Probe for (1) "What was the amount of distance?" (2) "What were the characteristics of each party's geographical location?" (3) "What was the personal meaning of the

reason for the distance?" and (4) "What was the personal meaning of the locations themselves?" Note to interviewer: Probe for themes utilizing social geography theory constructs of place/nonplace, abstract space, cybercommunity, utopia/heterotopia, habitus, uses, and practices.]

2. What were some of the challenges involved for you and your significant other in maintaining a long-distance relationship?

[Probe for (1) "What were your typical lengths of time apart?" (2) "What was the frequency and type of contact when apart?" (4) "How often were you apart?" (5) "Where did you usually meet when you got together?" (6) "What was your satisfaction with these same issues?"]

3. What forms of communication did you rely on most to stay in touch with each other when you were apart?

[Probe for more forms of communication: "Did you use the technology available during the historical time period in which the relationship was conducted?" and "How would you rate these forms of communication by frequency of use, length of time per use by type, and by satisfaction?"]

4. There are often costs associated with different forms of communication, as well as issues of access to equipment. How were these handled during the relationship?

[Probe for gender differences in male partners' perceptions of these issues, if applicable, including initiative, power, and leadership issues: "Were there differences in how you and your partner conducted the long-distance relationship, such as handling costs of communication and access to equipment? How much was this due to him being a male?"]

5. As a woman, did you encounter any advantages or disadvantages to this kind of relationship in terms of having your own say and voicing your perspectives?

[Probe using feminist theory constructs: "Did you feel you expressed yourself in a different "voice" from your partner, if he was male? "Did you perceive differences in communication needs and styles within relationships and different orientation to cyberspace?"]

6. How did you find any of these advantages/disadvantages changed or nuanced, depending on the form of communication technology used?

[Probe for differentials: "What were the differences in using snail mail, e-mail, telegrams, personal deliveries, audiotapes, videotapes/home movies, online chat rooms, instant messaging (IM), telephone, cell phone (including how the following were used: text messaging, paging, built-in digital camera, use of photos of loved one as phone screensaver and how often updated, etc.), BlackBerry, webcam with PC?"]

7. When you were physically together periodically, what forms of transportation did you use, and where did you most often get together? How were the costs handled? When you were not actually engaged in face-to-face communication, how did you communicate on these occasions, compared to when you were apart?

8. How long did the long-distance part of the relationship last? What brought it to an end?

[Probe for perceived effect of strains of separation and reunification if states the relationship terminated]

9. Looking back on it, what did you learn about the impact of communication technology on long-distance relationships? [*Alternative:* If you knew a woman who was

starting a long-distance relationship, what would you advise her to use in terms of communication technology, and how?]

10. What are some gender differences you observed in the conduct of your long-distance relationship? In the use of communication technology in the long-distance relationship?