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**THE ARMED FORCES  
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# PhD Summary

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## **Intermittent Separation:**

Exploring the psycho-social impact on  
dispersed military families

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## Background

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The family has always had a significant role in the wider functioning of the military. Historically, military families have moved around with serving military personnel, often termed ‘following the flag’ or ‘camp followers’ (Selous, Walker, & Misca, 2020). The presence of family is often an important foundation of psychological stability (Bellou & Gerogianni, 2014). However, the perceived role and identity of the military family is shifting alongside the introduction of Government and Ministry of Defence (MOD) initiatives and policies, designed to increase the flexibility of serving personnel and encourage family stability.

Instead of ‘following the flag’, it is increasingly more accessible for families to remain living dispersed from the serving member of their family. Existing data from the tri-service families’ continuous attitudes survey for the last six years suggests that around 24% of families are already living geographically dispersed from the serving member of their family (MOD, 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019, 2020). There has also been a reported increase in the geospatial distribution of military families in England since the 2010 Strategic Defence and Security Review, with greater numbers of military families living in locations beyond the commuting distance to military bases (Rodrigues, Osborne, Johnson, & Kiernan, 2020).

Separation is central to dispersed military family life, however, current evidence is limited to the effect of operational deployments on spouses and children (e.g. Mansfield et al., 2010; Riggs & Riggs, 2011; Rossetto, 2015; Thandi, Greenberg, Fear, & Jones, 2017; White, de Burgh, Fear, & Iversen, 2011) especially since 2001 and the Iraq and Afghanistan campaigns. Family separations, as a result of operational deployments, are usually for an extended, fixed period of time. For those living geographically dispersed, separation often occurs during the working week, with the military family member returning at the weekends. The length and duration of separation through dispersal can vary, but critically is often intermittent. There is no official definition of a dispersed military family. However, for this PhD, a dispersed military family was defined as:

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*“a military family that lives geographically separate from the military member of their family, not as a result of relationship separation”*

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These families primarily live in civilian communities away from military bases but can live in military housing. Other phrases that have been used to identify similarly defined families include, *weekending* and living *married unaccompanied*.

Research has explored the psychological effects of separation on military families due to operational deployments, however, a gap remains in research pertaining to the impact of non-deployment related separations such as living geographically dispersed (Eaton et al., 2008). Literature looking at dispersed military families has been minimal, single service focused and not peer reviewed (see Gribble & Fear, 2019; RAF Families Federation, 2019; Verey & Fossey, 2013). Consequently, this study aimed to explore the psycho-social impact of intermittent separation on dispersed military families.

## Method

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A mixed methods, Explanatory Sequential Design (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003) was utilised with two phases (see Figure 1). Pragmatism was employed as the underpinning methodology. The purpose of the first phase was to provide an understanding on what is already known about dispersed military families and separation.

Phase 1a involved a systematic narrative review to critically evaluate existing literature on the impact of separation on military families. Phase 1b reported geospatial analysis of publicly available data to determine if there was a suitable proxy variable for the geolocation of dispersed military families. Phase 2 provided primary research findings through semi-structured interviews with dispersed spouses, partners, and children of UK military personnel.

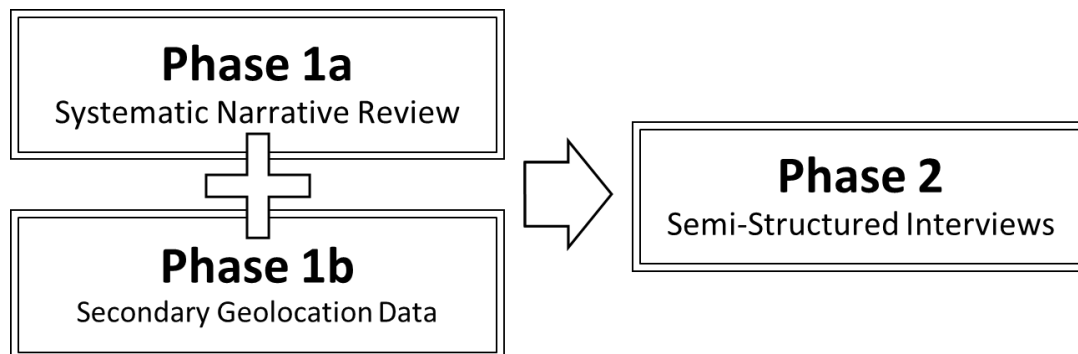
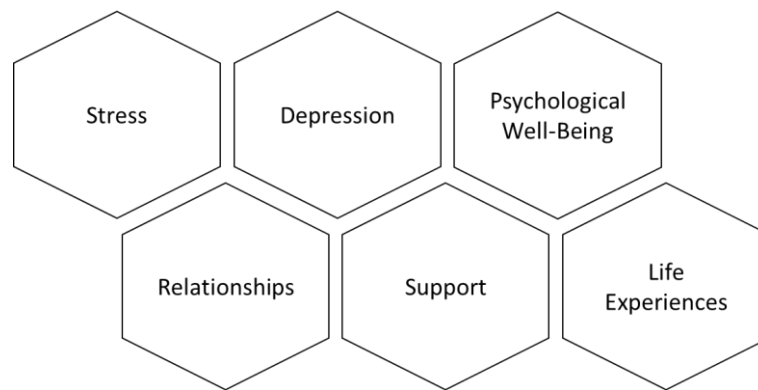


Figure 1. Explanatory Sequential Design

## Phase 1a

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The systematic narrative review critically evaluated existing literature to answer the question: *what is the impact of separation on military families?* Databases were searched for papers available between January 2001 and July 2018. After reviewing all returned papers, and excluding those that were irrelevant, 18 papers were accepted for use in the systematic narrative review. Following thematic analysis, six main themes were generated:



Review findings indicated that military families' experiences impact their psychological well-being during military-induced separations with specific increases in stress (Andres, 2014; Burton, Farley, & Rhea, 2009; Marek & Moore, 2015; Warner, Appenzeller, Warner, & Grieger, 2009), depression (Everson, Darling, & Herzog, 2013; Faulk, Gloria, Cance, & Steinhardt, 2012) and anxiety symptoms (Meadows et al., 2016). High levels of positivity were found to be a protective factor against the development of depressive symptoms at low and high levels of stress (Faulk et al., 2012). Less stress during reintegration was associated with greater family functioning and parental satisfaction. Positive aspects of deployment were also acknowledged, where deployment was credited with personal growth by military spouses and prompted family members to cultivate their skill, talent and autonomy (Knobloch, Basinger, Wehrman, Ebata, & McGlaughlin, 2016).

Communication and relationships were also affected, but social support can mitigate the psychological effects of separations (Faulk et al., 2012; Marek & Moore, 2015; Oblea et al., 2016; Skomorovsky, 2014). Higher levels of social support were significantly associated with better psychological health (Skomorovsky, 2014), higher levels of relationship satisfaction (Andres, 2014), fewer depressive symptoms (Skomorovsky, 2014), and lower levels of stress (Oblea, Badger, & Hopkins-Chadwick, 2016; Van Winkle & Lipari, 2015). Levels of relationship satisfaction appeared to be directly related to separation. Lower levels were experienced during separation, regardless of the length of time (Andres, 2014; Dandeker, French, Birtles, & Wessely, 2006; Meadows et al., 2016).

Throughout all of the literature, normalisation was a key resource used by military spouses and partners, suggesting this was used as an aid to adjust to extended separations and framed absences as part of the family story (Gustavsen, 2017; Patzel, McBride, Bunting, & Anno, 2013). Despite this normalisation and acceptance, challenges experienced on a day-to-day basis during the separation period were not discounted. All papers identified a dissatisfaction during separation, with many participants feeling as though they were temporarily single parents (Gustavsen, 2017; Patzel et al., 2013; Verey & Fossey, 2013).

The impact of experiencing multiple deployments was inconclusive. Some papers reported that the familiarity of multiple deployments made separations easier, whereas other papers determined that the anticipation and dread of experiencing the separation again made the experience more challenging (Dandeker et al., 2006; Gustavsen, 2017; Patzel et al., 2013). A positive evaluation of relationships, autonomy and utilising informal social networks were found buffer the stressors of military-induced separation.

## **Phase 1b**

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Military families provide a significant role in the wider functioning of the military, therefore, knowing their geolocation is essential for the future planning of support services. No publicly available dataset provided intelligence on the location of military families. Any information recorded on the MOD's Joint Personnel Administration system was not sufficient or accurate enough to provide detailed data on the geolocation of families, especially those living dispersed. Additionally, data on JPA systems was not easily available and gaining access would be time consuming and thus costly as well as the difficulties pertaining to data protection.

Consequently, no information was available on the geolocation of dispersed military families in the UK. The lack of centralised information on the location and geospatial distribution of military families suggested the need to identify a dataset that could serve as a proxy. A proxy measurement is *"an indirect measure of the desired outcome which is itself strongly correlated to that outcome"* (The Center for Government Excellence, 2020). Government organisations have utilised proxy data to bridge the gap in information when a direct measure has been unavailable. Proxy measures are highly advantageous in providing greater access to information in a more timely manner compared to an original measure (Mahnken et al., 2014).

Phase 1b explored existing publicly available data to determine if there was a suitable proxy to estimate the geolocation of dispersed military families. There were some restrictions to the

datasets used as there was no definitive way to estimate where these families reside. As a result, the following datasets were reviewed in an attempt to derive the best estimate:

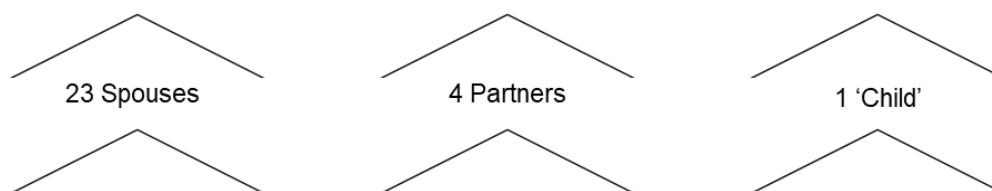
- Location of UK Regular Service and Civilian Personnel Quarterly Statistics 2017
- Census 2011: Armed Forces Household Reference Person (England and Wales)
- Service Child Pupil Premium allocation data 2017/18 (England Only)

Geospatial analysis was carried out to visualise the data at the local authority level. Each dataset provided a more accurate proxy for the geospatial distribution of military families. However, by the very definition of a proxy variable, this is an indirect measure of the phenomenon. Consequently, there were many caveats to the datasets that were considered when determining the viability of a proxy. Findings from Phase 1b argued that *there is no publicly available dataset that can act as a suitable proxy for the geolocation of dispersed military families* due to the number of limitations on the data.

## Phase 2

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As a result of the findings from Phase 1, Phase 2 sought to explore the psycho-social impact of intermittent separation on dispersed military families through primary research. Twenty-eight semi-structured interviews were carried out with civilian spouses, partners, and children of dispersed UK military personnel to gain a greater understanding of their experiences.



Participants were all female, aged between 21 and 52 (mean=36.5, SD=8.7) with a wide range of dispersal experience from 3 months to 12 years (mean=4.4, SD=3.3). Eleven participants were family members of Royal Navy and Royal Marines (RNRM) personnel, 11 participants of Army personnel and 6 participants of RAF personnel. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, online and via telephone, lasting around 45-60 minutes. Transcripts were analysed using Framework Analysis (Gale, Heath, Cameron, Rashid, & Redwood, 2013) and generated five themes: *Identity, Loneliness, Well-Being, Familial Relationships and Accessing Support*.



Identity: Military Identity, Wider Understanding, Independence

The identity to which participants ascribed to themselves appeared to fluctuate in relation to separation. Difficulties were experienced in determining where participants felt they 'fitted' in

either civilian or military communities due to a lack of shared experience and perceived lack of understanding from others. There was a disconnect between identifying as a military family in practical terms and not feeling part of the military community.

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*“I would still identify as a military family, but I’m not sure I would say we feel part of the community”*

[P05, family of Officer (RAF), currently dispersed 5 years, no prior experience of dispersal]

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*“Within the Armed Forces community, I don’t think the impact of that kind of longer-term weekendening is really recognised fully”*

[P12, family of Officer (RNRM), currently dispersed 11 years, no prior experience of dispersal]

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However, for many participants, separation allowed them to become more independent. They experienced greater responsibilities for the household, finances, and the parenting role (for those with children). Stability of home life meant that participants could explore employment and career opportunities as well as any interests and hobbies. Many participants strived for this independence but also acknowledged they had little choice but to become independent.

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*“I’ve never had to been able to have a career because I’ve followed my husband’s career. So, for me to be able to get a job and say I actually love my job and think I’m actually going to be able to stay in this job...”*

[P04, family of Other Ranks (Army), currently dispersed 5 years, no prior experience of dispersal]

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*“I need to do a bit more for myself and I think that’s a really good thing. I think it’s like made me more independent. I’m a stronger person I think”*

[P22, family of Officer (Army), currently dispersed 4 years, prior experience of dispersal]



Loneliness: Emotional Loneliness, Social Loneliness, Single Parenting

Loneliness was an integral theme in participant narratives of dispersal. There were two distinct types of loneliness experienced by participants. Emotional loneliness was felt through the loss of contact with the military member of their family. The close relationship unit was challenged through difficulties communicating and a lack of physical comfort.

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*“I think I have found it difficult not living with my husband, more so not having people to talk, having somebody to talk to on a night... it’s lonely”*

[P03, family of Other Ranks (RAF), not currently dispersed, prior experience of dispersal]

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Social loneliness was as a result of a lack of connection and support from social networks. Participants discussed the negative impact of not feeling as though they belonged to the

military community. They tried to buffer the social loneliness through employment and connections.

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*“Started following a couple of pages on Instagram of military families and I do kinda get a bit of comfort knowing that it’s not just me having a wobble today”*  
[P20, family of Other Ranks (Army), currently dispersed 7 years, no prior experience of dispersal]

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Loneliness appeared to be exacerbated for those with children. These participants discussed feeling as though they operated as a single parent during separation. The extra responsibilities as a result of this, and the reinforcement of separation from the military member of the family, left many feeling as though they were in an unequal relationship due to the discrepancies in parenting.

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*“I feel like a single parent in the week really and it’s hard for him as well cos he feels kind of distant from the kids”*

[P07, family of Officer (RAF), currently dispersed 1.25 years, prior experience of dispersal]

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*“It feels much more unequal because I’m doing all the childcare on top of working and looking after the house where ... you know in the week, essentially he is on his own and single. I’m not saying it’s not hard in different way, but I think for me certainly, it doesn’t feel as much of an equal way of living anymore”*

[P12, family of Officer (RNRM), currently dispersed 11 years, no prior experience of dispersal]

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Well-Being: Stress, ‘It is what it is’ Mentality, Coping

Living separately from the military member of the family through dispersal had a big impact on participants’ well-being. All participants reported stress across the separation period, affecting their mental health and emotional responses. The stress was difficult to manage due to the increase in responsibilities when the military member of the family was away. This was exacerbated by the intermittent nature of dispersal, with greater pressure placed on the weekend when they returned home.

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*“There is a big pressure of coming home for a very short, condensed weekend and then away again... a huge time pressure in terms of family time spent together”*

[P05, family of Officer (RAF), currently dispersed 5 years, no prior experience of dispersal]

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*“I felt when he’s deployed you would get almost a peak where you feel like I can do this, this is ok and then they would be coming back and you think it’s a little bit of transition and then you can move on whereas this is like literally up and down every week”*

[P01, family of Officer (Army), currently dispersed 9 months, no prior experience of dispersal]

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Relationships were affected and some participants articulated that experiencing operational deployments had been easier than living dispersed as it was a more stable separation. Regardless, participants approached dispersal with an 'it is what it is' mentality, focussing on the positive aspects and powering through for the benefit of the family.

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*"I guess there is just no right solution for military families. Someone is always going to lose out, whether it be me and my career, the kids, and their schooling or him not being with us as a family. There is always a compromise that has to be made by someone"*

[P07, family of Officer (RAF), currently dispersed 1.25 years, prior experience of dispersal]

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*"We all have to do what is best for our families and do what we can"*

[P02, spouse of Officer (RAF), currently dispersed 5 years, prior experience of dispersal]

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*"It has it's challenges for sure, but the way we look at it is, it will have a longer-term benefit, so we just suck it up just now and get on with it"*

[P07, family of Officer (RAF), currently dispersed 1.25 years, prior experience of dispersal]

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A positive outlook and years of dispersal experience created an ambivalence to the separation, but this did not help all participants to cope with the challenges of dispersal. Some maladaptive coping was reported. Support networks and a connection with the military community appeared to be key to coping.



Familial Relationships: Finding Relationship Balance, Communication, Military Parent and Child Relationship

At the centre of families is their relationships. It was important for participants to find a balance between weekend activities, maintaining relationships and finding time to relax. The weekends (or when the military member of the family returned home) was the most challenging period of the dispersal. The impact of the condensed time to spend together was felt by all participants.

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*"He wasn't getting home till midnight on a Friday night and then he was having to leave them on a Sunday night, so it was quite hard because he was tired but still trying to do everything. We weren't able to make the most of the time that we had"*

[P03, family of Other Ranks (RAF), not currently dispersed, prior experience of dispersal]

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Adjustments to the roles and responsibilities each time they were separated and reunited was difficult, especially when the military family member had expectations that everything was as they left it. However, for some participants the repeated separations and reunions became part of a routine.

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*“They’re kind of used to it. They are a bit thrown off if he’s on duty and he doesn’t come home at a weekend... But they’re used to the weekends. Monday to Friday we’ve got routines, this is what we do*

[P04, family of Other Ranks (Army), currently dispersed 5 years, no prior experience of dispersal]

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Communication using technology was an important tool in maintaining familial relationships during separation. Although interactive methods of communication such as video calls enhanced military parents’ relationships with their children, participants reported that technology could not replace face-to-face contact.

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*“If something happens and you want to be able to discuss it. It’s harder to talk on the phone than it is to talk when he comes home at night and we can sit and have a cup of tea and talk about what’s bothering us, that’s hard”*

[P07, family of Officer (RAF), currently dispersed 1.25 years, prior experience of dispersal]

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Children spent a lot of time missing their military parent, especially when they missed out on key events such as sports days. The intermittent nature of dispersal caused confusion for younger children and many had negative emotional reactions to the military parent upon reunions. Older children appeared to show more acceptance to the separation.

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*“I think we’re very mindful of the fact that he is away a lot and that the boys do miss out and he doesn’t necessarily come to their sports day and parent’s evenings”*

[P05, family of Officer (RAF), currently dispersed 5 years, no prior experience of dispersal]

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#### Accessing Support: Support Services, Communities

Participants’ access to support appeared highly dependent upon how connected they felt to the community and their understanding of what support services were available. They did not feel as though they were treated as, or entitled to, the same support as other military families. Military welfare was primarily located on military bases and some participants did not find this support physically accessible or inclusive. For those without children this was especially true, as support was reported as often focussing on parents and children.

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*“There are stresses and strains that come from being dispersed and it’s not that you’re wanting special treatment. You just want to be given the same access to facilities and services that you are when you are in a regiment or you’re somewhere static”*

[P01, family of Officer (Army), currently dispersed 9 months, no prior experience of dispersal]

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*"I did go back to the centre, but it was all very focused on supporting mothers and children. Children rather than wives. So, I didn't engage in that again... It feels, as someone who doesn't have children, that I'm excluded from that part of the support"*

[P19, family of Other Ranks (RNRM), currently dispersed 12 years, prior experience of dispersal]

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A military background or having lived on a military base before dispersal, appeared to increase the likelihood that participants knew that support was available, but many reported that they did not know who to contact. Communities were at the centre of support for participants during separation, but again the geographical distance caused problems in connecting with others. Consequently, participants relied on civilian communities to provide social support. Unfortunately, many reported a lack of understanding and further difficulties in connecting to others.

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*"Just little things like people probably don't realise how important the weekends are for you"*

[P08, family of Officer (Army), currently dispersed 6 years, no prior experience of dispersal]

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*"I think there is a lack of acknowledgement as well sometimes, within the military community that it's a choice you know. Moving around is also a choice because people don't have to do that"*

[P12, family of Officer (RNRM), currently dispersed 11 years, no prior experience of dispersal]

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*"No, we don't really know anybody whose living, living life like us"*

[P20, family of Other Ranks (Army), currently dispersed 7 years, no prior experience of dispersal]

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Similar experiences were reported with the military community, particularly for those who had never lived on base. Only a small minority of participants knew of other dispersed families. Nevertheless, all participants acknowledged the benefit of connecting with other dispersed families, military or civilian.

## **Discussion**

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UK initiatives and military surveys indicated a change in the way military families live, encouraging stability and increasing flexibility. A large number of families are already estimated to be living dispersed from the military member of their family. Frequent separations and regular relocations make military families distinct from other families (Palmer, 2008). This is more evident in dispersed military families who often experience separation and reintegration of the military member of their family at recurring intervals.

Findings from Phase 1 and Phase 2 have indicated that separation through dispersal influences the overall psychological well-being of military families and that this can be buffered by social support. The intermittent nature of dispersal can exacerbate the challenges military families face, but a positive outlook, prior dispersal experience and fostering independence helps to buffer this to a certain extent. However, not enough is known about the geolocation of the wider dispersed military family community and no publicly available dataset currently available is a suitable as a proxy for this.

The integration of findings from Phase 1 and Phase 2 begin to shape an understanding of the psychological and social impact intermittent separation can have on dispersed military families. Consequently, six overarching concepts emerged acknowledging existing theories and research:



Upon the integration, the findings suggested that dispersed military families have a fluid identity that can change over the separation period, dependent upon the social situation (i.e., military vs. civilian community). A disconnection with the military community and the separation from the military family member caused dispersed military families to experience social and emotional loneliness. It was argued there was also a fluctuation in emotional loneliness across separation. Stability was consistently reported as a reason for dispersal, particularly as a result of the implementation of UK initiatives that encouraged stability and flexibility for military family life.

Separation had an impact on the psychological well-being of dispersed military families. Internal and external resources were found to be integral in determining good well-being and stressors associated with separation posed a challenge to this. Resilience was highlighted as a buffer for the challenges experienced. Specifically, resilient protective factors such as social support networks, a positive outlook and normalisation helped dispersed military families to cope with separation. Dispersed military families often relied on social support, such as familial relationships, to mitigate the effects of separations on psychological well-being. However, those without this were found to experience social loneliness as a result of separation.

## Recommendations

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Recommendations were made throughout the thesis, to indicate what could be done to support dispersed military families. These recommendations came as a direct result of research findings and in the case of Phase 2, the participants themselves. Recommendations include focussing on qualitative research methods to assess the impact of separation on military families; accurate recording of information on military families on MOD Joint Personnel Administration system; greater inclusion of dispersed military families in military community; and greater access to information and support and raising awareness.

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A greater focus should be given to Joint Personnel Administration System used in the MOD to record information about military personnel, making completion compulsory.

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Greater accuracy is needed regarding information on the whole of the military family such as, dispersal status and location in addition to the current declaration of marital status and dependent children.

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Outreach from military welfare to establish contact with dispersed military families and provide information and support.

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Provide access or at least a point of contact at local bases, relative to the location of the dispersed family as well as the base at which their military family member is posted.

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Create greater connections with other dispersed families through social media and localised 'meet-ups' for adults and children.

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More accessible information is needed for dispersed military families, detailing what they are entitled to in terms of support and how/where they can access this.

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Greater awareness and acknowledgement is needed regarding the dispersed military families - what dispersal is, the impact of the separation and explore how to support the families.

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Further research is needed on the impact of multiple military-induced separations on military families

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Further research is needed with a greater focus on qualitative methods to further explore the meanings and experiences of military families.

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## Funding

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## More Information

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For more information about the PhD research project, please contact Dr Alison K Osborne: [alison.osborne2@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:alison.osborne2@northumbria.ac.uk)

An electronic copy of the full thesis can be found [here](#).

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