Role Transitions of Women in Dual Naval Career Couples: A Life Course Perspective

By David G. Smith

Introduction

While military service and its associated life course effects have been extensively studied, scant attention has been paid to recent demographic trends such as the increase of women and the nature of their service over the past four decades.\(^1\) Shifts in military women’s work-family roles across the life course are closely related to broader societal trends of increased education and labour force participation. In particular, dual-earner couples in the US have become more common with 47 percent of married couples both working outside the home (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014). Work and family roles for these couples challenge traditional family gender roles as both partners negotiate for time in their chosen roles and manage responsibilities for family and both careers.\(^2\) Adapting work and family roles is influenced by structural factors such as childcare, maternal employment policies, career milestones, as well as psychological factors such as psychological centrality, identity, role evaluation, role commitment and stressors.\(^3\)

Like their civilian counterparts, dual military couples (where both husband and wife are in the military) experience structural factors such as childcare, career paths, and assignment policies and psychological factors such as role commitment, identity, and stressors in negotiating work and family roles.\(^4\) Additionally, dual military couples uniquely contend with the military’s “up or out” promotion policy, combat deployments, and family separation that can affect work and family roles and decision-making across the life course.\(^5\)

The life course perspective integrates several concepts using a role context. Roles are understood to be socially-defined positions within institutions that have associated meaning, expectations, behaviour, and resources.\(^6\) In addition to the timing and sequencing of roles across the life course, this approach examines work and family decisions in life course trajectories from the perspective of cultural and social meaning attached to social roles based on expectations. As women with careers in the military marry, become parents, and make

\(^1\) Cf. MacLean & Elder, 2007 ; Teachman, 2013.
\(^2\) Cf. Gilbert, 1993 ; Papp, 2000 ; Brott & Myers, 2000 ; Bartley et al., 2005 ; Bird & Schnurman-Crook, 2005.
\(^3\) Thoits, 1992 ; Gilbert, 1993 ; Bird & Schnurman-Cook, 2005.
\(^4\) Lakhani & Gade, 1992 ; Stander et al., 1998 ; Kelley et al., 2001 ; Smith & Segal, 2013.
\(^5\) Orthner, 1980 ; Farkas & Durning, 1982 ; Orthner & Bowen, 1982 ; Teplitzky et al., 1988 ; Lakhani & Gade, 1992 ; Rosen, 1992 ; Smith, 2015.

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career decisions, new role expectations become activated and can affect not only the individual’s behaviour, but the couple’s behaviour in the form of new role meaning.

As role changes occur in the life course, role identities adapt to new context and meaning. Burke (2006) found that identity standards can change based on the interaction of new roles and circumstances. The iterative and adaptive nature of social roles allows for changes in context as a woman moves through the life course. Decisions related to changes in work and family social contexts objectify meaning through life role transitions. This research examines women in dual military couples through the lens of life course role transitions to better understand how shifting role resources, demands and needs are useful in explaining work-family decision-making that facilitates having three careers: hers, his, and the family.

**Finding the Right Role Identities “Fit”**

Role configurations and trajectories focus on how roles are combined and how patterns can be analyzed across the life course. Recently, role configuration research has emphasized the importance of multiple roles in combining women’s roles of work and family. While it is less clear how the combination of multiple roles affect the other spouse’s roles, Cast and Bird’s (2005) research on role-taking ability over time suggests that women may in fact be better at role-taking when exposed to non-normative domains such as paid labour activities.

A theoretical perspective that provides a systemic explanation for combining roles and associated resources with the timing of roles is work-family fit.7 This holistic approach to understanding how families and work ‘fit’ together in terms of role resources and demands in relation to age, life stage, and upcoming role transitions provides a means to examine women’s experiences in dual military couples.8 Women in dual military couples may perform their roles as professional, spouse, and parent to most effectively employ available resources and shift the timing of demands and needs to support their work-family priorities. For example, strategically adapting to fit resources to demands of structured career paths is often employed in terms of “scaling back”.9

**The Importance of Roles and Transitions in the Life Course**

Planning for the future can take the form of anticipated role transitions, often related to having children or retirement. Expected role transitions can affect present day decision-making and behaviour in the form of shifting priorities or resources within work and family domains. The “shadow of the future” can also be seen when couples try to predict what effects future role transitions such as childbirth may bring in relation to their careers.10

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7 Grzywacz & Bass, 2003; Voydanoff, 2005; Moen et al., 2008a; Moen et al., 2008b; Moen, 2011.
8 Moen, 2011.
10 Huinink & Feldhaus, 2009.
Timing of lives considers the temporal continuity of roles enacted, timing of role transitions, sequencing and duration of roles located within biographical time, social time, and historical time.\textsuperscript{11} Based on motivations and goals, couples will use resources available to react and adapt to external events based on the roles occupied.\textsuperscript{12} Biographical time refers to the age-graded sequencing of experiences as people age. Social time is composed of the socially and culturally defined roles and events which shape the life course through schemas, rules, and availability of resources based on social position.\textsuperscript{13} Social time can also be the synchronization of multiple trajectories such as the work-family interface. Social timing of role transitions can provide opportunities, options, and constraints. Choices and decisions made early in the life course begin an experiential accumulation that makes each trajectory a personal and unique experience. Sequencing and ordering of decisions is also important in relation to the effects of earlier decisions.\textsuperscript{14} The lockstep sequencing of careers as education/employment/retirement serves as a cultural and social structure that continues to influence career paths and how paid work is perceived and especially in traditional organizations such as the military.\textsuperscript{15}

Timing of children and parenthood comes at the nexus of work and family trajectories for dual career couples who feel that work may reduce family size and delay childbearing. Timing of children for two professionals is often a battle of calendars in trying to find the best time in each other’s career as well as matching the right biological time. Additionally, men and women see children as being incompatible with work demands, time demands, and the perception of commitment to work being questioned by having a child.\textsuperscript{16}

When it comes to dual military couples’ careers, analyzing the timing and sequencing of military career transitions in conjunction with the partner’s career and the family pathways is important to understanding the meaning of roles and their transitions. Men and women in dual-career couples in the military may have different perspectives on how they enact their roles as naval officer, spouse, and parent. Because the Navy does not differentiate between husband and wife for career needs, these couples are forced to create their own combinations of roles in forming their life course trajectory. While the military is a male-dominated institution, women and men in dual military couples are not able to follow the traditional breadwinner model and serve together. Similarly, dual-career couples may prioritize work and family differently as they struggle to maintain two careers in a work domain structured to support only the male career in each family with the assumption that there is a full-time wife to provide support and help meet the work demands of the military. If work and family are

\begin{footnotes}
\item[14] Pavalko, 1997.
\item[16] Altucher & Williams, 2003.
\end{footnotes}
structured by gender roles, how do dual military couples and other non-traditional families adapt their performance of roles in order to achieve their families’ and their personal goals and motivations to be successful? The choices related to becoming parents, the timing of children, and the priority of work careers and family may help to understand how gendered roles are influential, or not, in developing life course trajectories for dual military couples.

In response to what popular media began depicting as the “opt-out revolution” by working women, work and family researchers studied working couples and found that most women were not leaving work for family reasons (pulled). Rather, working women were being forced away from paid market work by the workplace (pushed).\(^{17}\) In the current historical period when women’s paid work is the norm, women are finding that as they enter the labour force and attempt to meet the social and cultural expectations of paid work based on the “ideal worker” norm, they are encountering a workplace and organizational culture that does not accept them. In what has been labelled the “double bind” by Hochschild (2003) or the “choice gap” by Stone (2007), women are expected to comply with the social norms of “intensive mothering” and “concerted cultivation” while performing as an “ideal worker”.\(^{18}\) Additionally, women still contend that husband’s jobs cross over and affect their own in terms of support for his job. The husbands’ job is still privileged in most dual-career marriages. In reality, it appears that women are making decisions about career and family within the constraints that exist today in society.

“Opting out” is a normal and expected decision point in the career of every military officer after the completion of their initial service obligation. All officers are faced with the decision to stay or leave the military no matter what their family status. However, there is compelling evidence that women are leaving the Navy at over twice the rate than men, which should also be evident in dual military couples since military women are more likely to marry military men. More importantly, the reasons women leave the Navy may shed light on the nature of their “choice” to leave and if it is different from the men in dual military couples.

**Methodology**

The goal of this study is to understand how work and family decisions influence role transitions and meaning in the life course trajectories of women in dual military couples in the US Navy. By studying the timing, sequencing and meaning of roles and role transitions we can better understand what enables women to continue their military service. Finally, conducting individual interviews rather than couple interviews allows an analysis of how women’s decision-making and associated outcomes about work and family decisions are different within couples.

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\(^{17}\) Stone, 2007.

For this study, qualitative methods provide the ability to examine and develop an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences. There are important commonalities in how these women develop multiple roles and transitions across the life course, prioritize work and family responsibilities, negotiate interpersonal relationships, and interact in the workplace culture to create a satisfying and meaningful life. Grounded theory emphasizes the importance of the actor as a social product in a social reality we all participate in creating and re-creating.19

The primary method for recruiting participants was by mailings and e-mail solicitation with the help of the US Navy. Through access to Navy personnel records, all dual military officer couples were identified and screened for eligibility. Potential participants were Navy officers married to another Navy officer. To create a heterogeneous sample of work-family career pathways, participants were sorted and sampled by rank, occupational specialty, active duty, Reserve, or retired status, pending separation from the Navy, and presence of children. Particular attention was given to dual military couples where one or both service members had received approval of resignation requests.

Semi-structured interviews were used to provide a rich, thick description of the social processes. A constant comparative analysis method was used during data collection and analysis was conducted concurrently. Consistent with the grounded theory approach, data were coded thematically and analyzed by emerging categories and themes which directed later interviews and sample selections until theoretical saturation.

Each wife and husband was interviewed separately to understand individual perceptions, experiences, meanings, and the relational aspects of family dynamics. The separate interviews aided in determining individual responses without the need to present a unified set of perspectives for the family by both partners.20 Interview questions were focused on six areas of inquiry beginning with the overarching focus on how work and family decisions influence the life course trajectories of dual military couples in the US military. Additionally, interviews included questions related to the timing and sequencing of work and family decisions and the historical context they were made; how role transitions and their meaning affected life course trajectories and outcomes; processes that influence decision-making related to role transitions and turning points; awareness of structural constraints (institutional/organizational work policies); what enables continued military service, and how a woman’s decision-making and associated outcomes about work and family decisions compares for dual military couples.

Findings

Women in dual military couples in this study find role transitions are influential in creating a work-family fit while managing two careers, finding co-located jobs with their

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19 Blumer, 1969.
20 Daly, 2007.
husbands, and dealing with time away from each other. In coordinating two careers with a family, maintaining flexibility and options is vital to achieving work and family goals based on life stage timing. The fast track military culture pushing people toward the most competitive career path is limiting for women who are fitting together two careers while trying to get nearby job assignments. Because these couples have twice as many factors to coordinate in the same organizational system, intricate and long-term planning is required to meet career and family goals as they negotiate the job assignment process and work to achieve co-location. Finding co-located job assignments for their individual career paths is challenging and often perceived to require more time and other family types.

The cumulative time these couples spend apart is measured in years. Time away from their family is the biggest sacrifice they make by being a dual military couple. Deployments and time away are central to these couples’ decisions, experiences, and pathways. Dual military couples perceive time in the context of time together and time away within a broader scope of deployments and co-location. This broader perspective of time, culture and organizational structure shapes the decision-making of couples across the life course in relation to the timing of role transitions.

**Combining and Separating Roles**

The meaning attached to specific roles in the context of gendered roles and role expectations influences how women combine worker and spouse roles, perform and adapt gender roles, and separate worker and spouse roles. Women in this study encounter challenges performing traditional gender roles in the military work context and find that giving a different meaning to a gender role has experiences ranging from adding stress to adding value. For dual military couples who are combining multiple roles in the domains of work and family, among the many aspects of the couple that influence marriage roles and the meaning of marriage are gender role attitudes.\(^{21}\) Characteristics of workplace culture that affect marriage and roles include supervisor gender role attitudes, prevalence of sexual harassment and discrimination, job opportunity, and performance expectations. Similarly, employer policies provide options and choices which can confirm or disrupt role identities that influence decision-making and the meaning found in military women’s marriages. Pseudonyms are assigned to protect anonymity of participants, children and Navy personnel.

Isabel describes the difficulty she has being what she perceives as a good mother while also being in the Navy:

> I remember the four-year old once when he was upset at me, just yelling, “well just go to your ship”…because at the time he associated if there was a bag at the door it was going to the ship. So I started sneaking out of the house at night before the next [time we went to sea]...

Later in the interview, Isabel suggests that being in the Navy and being a good mother are not compatible:

…how much would my kids remember if we’ve already got two years of interruptions in our lives and then you’re going to follow that up with a year [in Iraq], then it’s even worse. The Mommy guilt thing. I said what I really wanted out of this life is, on my tombstone to say I was a great Mother…at what point does that start, because it’s not now? That’s a challenge.

The other perspective that respondents revealed in combining roles as spouse and worker is an appreciation of what it means to be the spouse at home when the other spouse is deployed. Both men and women report how much more appreciation they have for civilian spouses who are at home with children while their service member is deployed. Zoe explains her experience with her husband being deployed:

…being married and having children has made me much more aware of what military spouses go through. I remember when I was single and young I was always like, these [civilian] spouses [are] always complaining about this or that, just get real. And it definitely helped me understand better, OK, when your spouse goes away for six, seven months at a time, or however long, that’s a lot of work at home.

Combining worker, parent, and spouse roles is accomplished through performing and adapting gender roles. Helen emphasized the change in gender roles when she describes one of her husband’s deployment homecomings, “[another female spouse] and I jokingly dressed up as 1950s housewives when our husbands came home just because we thought it would be funny to [meet our husbands] as 1950s housewives”.

While combining and adapting roles is important to these couples, separating worker and spouse roles is also integral to their work and family decision-making. Because so much of their work and family life is integrated, there is a blurring of boundaries between work and family roles that leads many couples to create boundaries and separate roles. In some cases, couples maintain separate work and family roles and are successful. During a conversation with her supervisor, Claire describes how during one shore tour she and Charles are assigned to the same command and work briefly in the same office:

I didn’t realize that you and Charles were married. I said yep. He said, how long have you 2 been married? Did this just happen? I said well sir, about 8 years. He said, wow, you never talk to him…but we worked in the same office and we just never spoke to each other.

Dana and her husband are also together in the same training squadron and Dana describes their experience during a training simulator:

You know Doug was my co-pilot and he was trying to be a really proactive co-pilot and he started doing things I didn’t want him to do and I was like, no, that is not how were going to do it and I was very directive with him. And when I finished,
our [simulator] instructor looked at us and he was like, you know you guys work really well together. You have really good communications; you’re very clear with each other.

In becoming skilled at separating roles and behaviour, many of the couples talk about their separate work and home personalities. In their Navy work role, they have one set of behaviour, and when they are at home as a spouse or parent, they have another. Rachel talks about separating her spouse and work roles in terms of social events where she can be expected to perform either or both roles, but chooses the spouse role:

And I’m also proud to be just his wife also. I like showing up to his events and when I go to his [social events], I don’t wear my uniform because I just like being his wife too, sometimes. You know, representing that. And so I think it’s a nice balance. It gives me that sense of having something that focuses on him too.

**Role Transitions**

Performing roles focuses on the timing and sequencing of role transitions typically experienced for these couples, including marriage, becoming a parent, and retirement. Adding the spouse role does not impact career paths for these couples other than to coordinate co-located jobs when that is a priority. Several women discuss the need to wait to get married until they have acquired their own life experiences and established their own career. Because these women join the Navy work force right after college in most cases, they have little life experience living on their own. Many women also want to spend time married and not at sea before having children. They anticipate their life will change with added responsibility and possibly stress. The couples in this study typically delayed marriage to establish work careers, gain life experience, and to find a partner in the challenging environment of a highly mobile work career. The military organization dictates the availability and access these officers have to the population of potential partners since the domains of work and family are so inter-related: 85 percent of the Navy is comprised of men. From a gendered role perspective, women are more likely to marry another military officer who understands the organization’s demands and requirements. People who marry relatively young are more likely to have their marriages result in divorce (nine people in this study) and then subsequently delay their present marriage to a military service member. Being previously divorced did not negatively influence the decision-making of these people related to maintaining a career in the Navy, as all nine people are either still on active duty with successful careers or have retired from a successful career.

Laura states that she needed to have time on her own before getting married:

…I think people should get married after they’ve been on their own for a little while, just so they can figure out who they are… it’s better to be established in your own career, your own life, before you can decide to embark on a shared life with somebody else...Because if I think back on how I was in grad school right after
I graduated undergrad… there’s no way that I would have been a very good spouse back then. But after figuring out my own, or what I should bring to a relationship and what I should take out from a relationship after having a few, and after living on my own, it seemed like the right time to get married…I just had this very clear, distinct, moment of thinking, I think now I can get married. I think now I can share these experiences with somebody else…I’ve lived my life and it’s time to share that with somebody else and build it together.

Becoming a parent was the next role transition which many women have already accomplished, some women postpone becoming a parent, and some are unsuccessful at becoming a parent. From a life course perspective, having children sometimes changes a woman’s work career trajectory. Most women officers join the Navy after completing college, so they are usually in their late 20’s when they have children, which also coincides with the timing of the first decision point of whether to stay in the Navy.

Navy policy influences the timing of children. For instance, women are prohibited from being assigned to ships beyond the 20th week of pregnancy and flight personnel must receive a waiver to fly while pregnant until the 28th week of pregnancy. For women to have children in the typical sequence of marriage and then children, they can wait until a shore duty opportunity, lateral transition to another warfare community, separate from the Navy, have children during their sea duty tours, adopt, or not have children. Elise explains how the timing of children worked for her: “to have kids or not to have kids and when do you have kids...that decision is made for me by my career pipeline”.

Melissa illustrates the timing of children in shore duty opportunities as they overlap with her biological age:

… if you’re married before your first shore duty, then it’s great…window to have children. We got married on this shore duty; we’re not having children right away. And then it would be another three, four years before I’m on shore duty again, which would be a three year window. By that point I’d be 34, 35 years old.

Delaying having children is a common theme that works for some women, while others have fertility problems. Beth talks about the impact of the Navy forcing family decisions and the long-term impact on the life course:

…it’s a stressful thing because I feel like decisions the Navy makes affect us long-term way beyond the Navy. It’s not concerned about that. That affects the outcome of how many kids we have, and when we have them. That’s a huge stressor.

Isabel talks about the impact of marrying later and waiting to start a family:

When we were in Guam, we tried to have a child through natural childbirth and were unsuccessful. So immediately we went through fertility testing…and basically they didn’t say we couldn’t have kids, [but] it would be more of a challenge than most normal couples would have.
For those able to have children, the role transition of becoming a parent changes career perspective, changes the meaning of deployment, and increases empathy for others with children. Changing a career perspective most often results in becoming less committed to the Navy. Olivia says, “Really, [promotion] is not that important to me as it was, you know what I mean, before I had a kid and before I was married and all that other stuff”. After having children, women in this study are more likely to make lateral transitions to other occupational specialties with less time deployed at sea, but none of the women in this study separated from the Navy after having children, which emphasizes their motivation to continue to serve as a family. This result could also be affected by sample selection. Further, some women also leave the Navy before they have children. One officer says becoming a parent makes her more committed to her naval officer role. Yvonne describes her change in commitment as: “…it was my daughter who was kind of my inspiration to let go and accept being in the Navy and continuing and wanting to continue to be in the Navy”.

Reducing time away from home and on deployments is a common theme for women in their parent role. Many women expect it to be emotionally difficult to leave their children for deployments but find it to be more stressful than expected. Isabel relates her experience with being deployed away from her children and developing strategies to maintain interaction with her children:

And you’re watching your kids play on a…DVD that took forever to arrive to the ship and you’re like, am I crying because he’s so cute or am I crying because I wasn’t there…it would be different if you knew you were going to be there the next time, but you don’t. And also if your kid thought you could be counted on…they still ask the questions are you going to be here for this…We now have a practice that when I go on travel, I Skype every night …because the first time we did it, the first question was, are you on the ship? And I said no honey, this is not the ship and once you said you weren’t on the ship, which meant we have no idea when you’re coming home, they were like OK, and they went off to play.

A few of the women talk about how becoming a parent makes them better officers because they have empathy for co-workers who are also parents. Zoe presents her perspective on how becoming a parent affects her role at work:

…it’s made me much more aware and understanding of other people and what they go through. So as a [Commanding Officer], I was able to understand, well my child is sick, I need to go home. Or if it happened to a spouse, we had …a number of people the reason they were there was because one of their family members had to be near a medical treatment facility…So it made me much more aware and I think probably relatable to more people.

Finally, retirement is a role transition discussed by most women and is based on the timing of their lives related to marriage, children, and number of years served. Critical decision junctures that occur between eight and twelve years of service determine if a woman
is going to stay on a pathway that leads to serving long enough – 20 years – to earn a military retirement. Women view serving for more than 10 years as a commitment to stay in the Navy until at least 20 years. Many women are focused on a family goal to have both spouses reach retirement. Other couples are content to get at least one person to retirement. Jessica states that at least one person in their family needs to reach retirement: “…we go back and forth on one of us is doing 20 [years], that’s the only thing we’ve said. Somebody’s gotta do it; somebody’s gotta suck it up and do 20 [years]”.

**Role Expectations for Raising Children**

Beyond the timing and sequencing of role transitions, role expectations are specifically influential for women with children and those planning to have children because they have definitive opinions on the environment in which they want their children to live and the timing and sequencing of children in their work lives. The most common concern for these women is ensuring that both parents are not deployed or away from home at the same time which becomes a career timing issue. While the Navy does not have an official policy for deploying both parents, most commands have informal practices to arrange for parents not to be deployed at the same time. Beyond not being deployed at the same time, the next concern for these women is to provide a stable home environment for children where parents are not constantly coming and going, which is also a career timing issue. Women feel it will be emotionally and cognitively difficult for the children to adapt to having parents continuously leaving and returning from deployment. To prevent this, parents pursue job assignments and timing of sea duty so that only one parent is on sea duty at a time. In the policy for assignment of dual military couples, the Navy formally discusses alternating sea and shore assignments for dual military parents to ease the burden of childcare, but only at the convenience of the Navy. Unlike their male counterparts who are married to civilian spouses, these women’s work-family trajectories are unique in that both partners are subject to the work-family policies, deployments, and structured career paths that influence their military service experiences. Wendy illustrates how her family approaches being away from children:

…I knew that it was going to cost a lot to my family and now I’ve got four kids. It’s not just one kid or two kids, its four kids that I don’t want to subject them to having one or the other parent being gone. And in the environment we’re in today…You were gonna go for six months or a year. So on top of sea duty requirements, you were looking at [additional deployment] requirements and I looked at my future and I thought, I don’t want my kids having one parent gone and then the other parent gone, and then the first parent being gone…there’s no stability for them….As soon as I made O-5, I turned down the opportunity to go to sea because I knew my intention was to retire at 20 [years of service].

Some women look ahead to the role transition of becoming a parent and start to shape their career decision-making and timing based on their expectations of how and when to raise their children. One woman is convinced she wants to have children in the next few years and
decides that she wants them to have a stay-at-home parent, which means she is looking at one of them leaving the Navy as the organization is not expected to be flexible. The expectation that their children should be raised with a stay at home parent is based on how they are socialized in their families with mothers who were not employed. Gloria recounts her expectations as she considers having children while being on active duty:

I think it’s possible, but I don’t think it’s what I’m comfortable with in terms of how I want to raise my children. I was brought up in a two parent family and so was Greg. And for both of us, our moms were the primary caregivers.

The nature of sea service and deployments with increased time away from home and family causes several women to discuss their guilt for having to put their children in day-care while they are at work and not being able to spend time with their children when they are not deployed. Some women with younger children explain that their children’s best hours of the day are while they are at work and they are only able to spend quality time with their children on the weekends. Laura presents her feelings on day-care and the time she is able to spend with her daughter on shore duty:

Because when Linda was first in day-care when she was about three months old…it was…hard and I think it is still hard from time to time because so much of her active time, growing time…is during the day. When she gets home, she wants to sleep, she’s tired and she’s cranky…I don’t always get all the good times with her…come Friday, I’m ready to not be away from her.

Conclusions

The organizational context shapes the meaning of the role transitions found in couples’ relationships. The importance of being married to another service member is found in their conversations about the meaning in a common understanding of their work experiences in the military, sharing a common knowledge and language in the military, and having an underlying trust and commitment in their relationship. The timing of marriage in the life course establishes a sequencing of other expected role transitions, including parenthood and retirement.

In the performance of expected work and family activities within the organization, combining, separating, and adapting the meaning of roles shape these women’s life course and their life satisfaction. Women in this study encounter challenges posed by the organization in performing traditional gender roles for parent and spouse; giving a different meaning to gender roles has outcomes that range from adding stress to adding value. Expected role transitions such as becoming a spouse do not impact career paths for these women. However, timing of role transitions is influenced when these women decide to wait to get married until they acquire their own life experiences and establish their own careers. The expected role transition for becoming a parent is usually planned, sometimes with exacting precision, but often results in changes in work career perspective and less desire to endure deployments.
women who postpone having children and are later unable to have children, adoption has proven to be a viable alternative. However, some women remain childless and harbour negative attitudes about the Navy and their career decisions and sacrifices.

While the family outcomes did not reflect the findings in Crawford et al. (2006) or Stoker & Crawford (2008) for women being more likely than men to separate from the Navy, there are some nuanced differences in their experiences that shape life satisfaction and perspective. For women, combining the roles of spouse and naval officer does not produce anxiety and stress in non-traditional gender roles. However, men struggle with combining these roles and often resolve this conflict by leaving the Navy. Women are just as likely as men to experience stress related to performing parental roles related to normal work schedule hours conflicting with childcare arrangements. It seems that being absent from work because of family responsibilities does not invoke a gendered response from co-workers.

Interestingly, the women in this study often have a long-term outlook on life, despite their relatively young age and early life stage, that includes perceiving their Navy careers as a life stage or stepping stone and will have an associated role transition to a second career, retirement, or new meanings for family roles, such as parents focusing more on their children. A long-term outlook influences their early career and family decision-making in the context of meeting their goals of serving their country while learning to cope with the frustrations and challenges of managing two careers, dealing with twice as much time away, and inflexible Navy career paths.

These women typically delayed marriage to establish work careers, gain life experience, and to find a partner in the challenging environment of a highly mobile work career. From a gendered role perspective, women are more likely to marry another military officer who understands the organization’s demands and requirements. The timing of these women’s lives shows that career decisions to stay in the Navy and family decisions to get married or begin having children are often interrelated based on the completion of the officers’ initial service obligation incurred when they entered the Navy. Decisions to stay in the Navy beyond the initial service obligation result in women planning to stay in the Navy until they are eligible for retirement. The initial service obligation is typically five to eight years, which makes the average age for this decision 27 to 30 years of age. Notably, this is roughly the same average age for when these women married, thereby potentially combining a major work decision with a major family decision in the timing of these couples’ lives. In reality, the sequencing of one of the major decisions preceded the other, but many were considered in combination, which reinforces the organization’s ability to keep dual military couples’ decision-making for family linked and within the context of the organization’s needs.

While this research provides the first accounts of military women’s work-family trajectories through timing of roles and role transitions, comparisons can be made with other dual career couples in civilian society. Dual academic and physician couples provide an
interesting comparison because they also work in a profession with institutional and structural constraints which may work similarly to the military. Some similarities between the two populations in their family outcomes are that women have lower rates of marriage than men and fewer children than men. For military, academic and physician women who do marry, they are more likely to marry someone in their same profession. Most interesting is the similar experience of having difficulty with co-located job assignments. In her study of women professors, Armenti (2003) finds that the career structure for university professors results in senior women professors timing babies in the month of May and junior women professors waiting until they have tenure to have babies. While the academic stigma and constraint is cultural, the constraint for the military is formal policy in addition to the cultural and institutional stigma associated with pregnancy on sea duty. Also related to family formation, women in dual academic and physician couples are more successful if they postpone marriage and children or do not marry at all.

While there are many similarities with other dual career couples, the nature of deployments and sea service, routine changes of location every 2-3 years, and relatively compact and structured career paths controls and limits work and family role transitions as found in the meaning these women described. Similar meaning and experience could likely be found with enlisted Navy women and women from other Services and countries contending with the same military work context in combat occupational specialties. From the life course perspective concept of human agency, decision-making based on exerting control of every aspect of their lives emerges from the conversations with these couples. The organizational constraints and demands are so overwhelming and comprehensive with two people in the same organization that these couples focus their time, energy, and efforts on keeping control of their lives and not letting the organization dictate any more decision-making than necessary. These dual-career couples use an integrated couples approach in their work and family decisions which focuses on the interaction with the organization instead of within the couple.

References


23 Astin & Milem, 1997 ; Sobecks et al., 1999.


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