Chapter 2

**Capable Patriots**

Narratives of Estonian Women Living with Military Service Members

Tiia-Trinia Trusua and Kairi Kasearu

**Introduction**

Scholarly literature on the military is abundant; however, most research concerning families of military service members has been carried out in the United States, and good quality research that takes into account the structural and contextual differences of other countries is scarce (Fossey 2012: 11). This is also the case in Estonia, where perhaps the main reason is that the military is a relatively young institution, as Estonia regained independence in 1991 and an entirely new Estonian Defence Forces structure was established at that time. Sociological studies involving and related to the military have focused on the formation and building of a military to suit the specific needs of Estonia. In designing our research, we therefore found very few studies involving Estonian military personnel and their families, and those we did find were bachelor’s and master’s level theses concentrating on the social guarantees provided by the state to military service members and their families. We, on the other hand, were interested in the wives and partners of military service members, and what it meant for them to be married to, or to live as a family with, a professional military service member.

The term “greedy institutions” is classically applied when the relations between the military and the family are discussed (Segal 1986). However, the greediness has changed over the decades due to the transitions that both of these social institutions have undergone (De Angelis and Segal 2015). Moreover, the military is not unique in its “greediness”; there are others, such as higher education institutions (Wright et al. 2004), which demand high levels of time and commitment from their members. However, the question of how the institutions of the military and the family are combined in everyday life is still relevant, as was also discussed in a 2015 work on military families and deployments in comparative perspectives (Moekler et al. 2015). Though from conception-based military organizations into occupational professional organizations has increased the need to take another look at the tensions between family and military. Heiselberg (2017) examines how the families of military service members become militarized, with military elements seeping into their daily lives, while trying to maintain close meaningful family ties and “good” or ideal family life over the course of deployment-induced separations. What society regards as good family life or considers to be normal is certainly time and culture-specific. Within the Danish military framework, the nuclear family persists as a normative ideal; this emphasis asserts pressure on the deployed father to perform fatherhood roles as intensively as possible (Heiselberg 2017: 72–81). At the same time, Gustavsen (2015), in an analysis of spouses of Norwegian professional military service members, indicates that the feelings of mastery and confidence that the spouses exhibit while their husbands are deployed dominate over the women’s feelings of stress occasioned by being in charge of the whole household. The private and public spheres of people’s lives are mutually interdependent (Pateman 1989: 3), meaning that entanglement of the civilian and military spheres is all but unavoidable, and that this is the case also when wives and partners of military service members create and negotiate their identities.

As we developed and conducted our interviews, we realized that the terms “military family” and “military spouse” are not expressions that are readily used in the Estonian context. One explanation for this might be that for the purposes of Estonia’s laws and social security system, families of military service members are considered to belong to the civilian side of the society; moreover, it is not culturally common to identify oneself through one’s spouse or partner. Most often, our interviewees would say that their husband or partner was in the military, but not that they were military spouses or that they were a military family. Therefore, we shall also endeavor to avoid such expressions, though it might at times make the text cumbersome to read.

**Research Considerations**

In our research, we concentrated on the stories that the wives and partners of military service members tell us about what it means to them to build a life and a family together with a professional military service member, and how these experiences influence their identity creation. The accounts of their experiences give us access to these women’s narrative reality—a term first used by Gubrium and Holstein (2009: 15–16). In this context, we use the term “narrative reality” to denote the sets of narratives that are shaped and constantly re-created collectively in our interactions and allow people to make sense of the events and experiences in their daily lives and their surroundings, as well as their inner worlds. Baker (2006: 28–34) also describes them as collective and public narratives, the first of which are the stories that have become widely accepted in a given society, and the second being narratives that are reproduced in society by institutions such as the media and which can change fairly rapidly. The public and collective narratives are the so-called big narratives, and, in addition to these, we also study “small stories” where people are agentic actors by positioning themselves, and thereby also become positioned, in certain roles in the big stories (Bamberg 2011: 10). Thus, we are looking at identity creation in two ways—both how people create the world with respect to which they position themselves, and how people in the context of the interview “want to be understood” (Bamberg 2011: 10). Narratives mirror the identity of the narrator, the preferred identity in that moment of interaction (Gergen 2005). We are characterized simultaneously by a continuous personal identity and by discontinuous personal diversity (Davies and Harré 1990: 46). This personal diversity is how we form our sense of self in different social and personal dimensions though discursive acts available to us (Harré 2015: 2). The forming of the sense of self starts from the self/other and agency expressions.

In this chapter, we shall be looking at the ways the women we interviewed establish their identity in their domestic partnership or marriage to a professional military service member and how civil-military entanglement becomes expressed in the context of comprehensive national defense.

**Understanding the Context of Narratives of the Wives and Partners of Professional Military Service Members in Estonia**

Estonia adheres to the principles of total defense—that is, all means will be employed to anticipate and prevent any possible military action against it (Estonian Ministry of Defence 2011). The security is strengthened by the civil society, where civic initiative plays an important role in the enhancement of national security and advancement of the sense of security (Estonian Ministry of Defence 2017). The initial military defense of the nation is carried out by territorial and nonterritorial units. The
terrestrial units are comprised of the Defence Forces and the Estonian Defence League (EDL), the latter being a militarily organized, armed, voluntary defense organization. These aspects of the Estonian defense concept are important to consider because in addition to professional military service members, a part of the national defense is carried out by people who volunteer as a part of their civic duty to perform defense duties without pay. These are people who choose to participate in military training and preparation for defense as part of their lifestyle. The Defence League is a well-known organization throughout the country, and its units are based on the administrative subdivisions in Estonia, meaning that the EDL can be seen as a “security blanket” covering the whole country. Thus, entanglement of the civilian and the military spheres has been encoded into the recent security documents and strategies in Estonia and is also evidenced by annual large-scale military exercises that include the military (active duty, conscripts, reservists, and allied troops), the EDL, the police, local municipalities, hospitals, and other parties, thus transforming civilian spaces temporarily into simulated battlefields.

Taking into account the formalized or perhaps even normative entanglement of the civilian population and the military, we draw the collective and public narratives that the wives and partners of professional military service members used as frames for positioning themselves during the interviews.

The first set of narratives describes the collective and public narratives of independence and the meaning of soldier and veteran in the Estonian context. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, the first period of independence for Estonia, the representation of the soldier has undergone a series of transformations in rather rapid succession. This transformation has not only been due to the warrior-peacekeeper tension that has become prevalent in recent decades in other Western democracies as well.

**The Fight for Freedom and Independence as the Apotheosis of Estonian History**

The core of Estonian nationhood has been the “struggle for independence”; though debatable, some believe that this has been the case since the thirteenth century (Tammi 2007: 505–8). This “struggle for independence” was at the very center of the first national awakening that led to the emergence of the Estonian nation-state in 1918 after the War of Independence. Independence was fairly short-lived, as the 1939 Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact led to the eventual occupation of Estonia by the Soviet Union in 1940. In the beginning of the 1980s, when Estonia was still a part of the Soviet Union, a group of young Estonian historians, who later became Estonia’s political elite, managed to portray the nation’s struggles as a continuation of the ancient “struggle for independence” (Tammi 2007: 505–8; Tammi 2016: 162-65), thus glorifying Estonians as freedom fighters. The need to create a positive history led to using the War of Independence leading up to independence in 1920 as the basis for setting the modern-day Estonian armed forces as a symbol of occupation. This does not extend to service in the Soviet army, as it was not associated with an occupier; the position was mostly “us” (Estonians) against “them” (the Soviets). There is another aspect to this narrative: because those who managed to avoid the unappealing prospect of serving for the required two years in the Soviet military were considered either lucky or smart enough to come up with a plan, those who did not manage to avoid service must have been unlucky or not smart enough, or worse, a voluntary enlistee, which on the background of opposition to all things Soviet bore out the societal perception of the Soviet soldier as a “dim-witted brute.”

**Fading Soviet-Afghan War Oppressor–Victim Dichotomy**

When the Soviet-Afghan War (1979–1989) started, the populations in the Soviet republics of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia took a very critical stance and actively protested against the war. Clear historical parallels could be drawn between the Soviet-Afghan friendship treaty and a similar treaty, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, concerning the Baltic States. In both cases the treaties were used to legitimize the entrance of Soviet troops into the respective countries (Philips 1986: 101). Estonians saw the Soviet troops in Afghanistan every bit as much as an occupying force as the Soviet forces were seen as such in Estonia. At the same time, compulsory conscription into the Soviet army continued in Estonia, and those who did not manage to avoid the draft were sent as conscripts to fight in Afghanistan. The war itself would be recast as a “pointless” conflict (Aleksievich, 1992: 105) already during the Soviet period and even in Russia. In Estonia, this created a collective narrative that was internally conflicting. The Estonian soldiers who had fought in the Soviet-Afghan War were at once considered oppressors (in Afghanistan and sometimes even in their own eyes or as seen by their fellow Estonians), and, while at home, considered victims of the Soviet regime.

**The New Capable and Persevering Veteran**

In the re-independence era—1991 to the present—the meaning of soldier has undergone a shift from the symbol of Soviet occupation back to a defender or fighter for Estonian independence. Since 2008, public polls have shown that the Estonian Defence Forces (EDF) has enjoyed high rates of trust in society, and up to 79 percent of the population say they have a positive attitude toward military personnel (Kivirähk 2017: 16–17). However, in 2003, when Estonia deployed forces to Iraq and, later, Afghanistan, the perception of the soldier as oppressor was quick to reemerge. This was partly because Estonia had not been involved in any combat missions prior to Iraq and Afghanistan, but also because of the Soviet-Afghan War. This attitude was countered by high-ranking Estonian officials’ unwavering support for these missions. Prior to the adoption of the Veterans Policy in 2012, the support system for deployed soldiers was still in need of enhanced measures to match the support needed by the Estonian soldiers. Prior to the policy, media attention centered on wounded soldiers and their need for additional social guarantees, while the Veterans Policy succeeded in introducing measures to boost public recognition. This led to the emergence of the new image of a capable and persevering veteran (Treusa 2015). It is important to keep in mind that in Estonia, the official definition of veteran predominantly includes those who have served on missions abroad.

**Closed Off and Separate**

Unlike some Central and Eastern European countries, Estonia did not inherit armed forces from the previous Soviet-aligned socialist state, and after regaining its independence in 1991, Estonia set out to build and develop its military structures from the ground up. Estonian independence was restored on the basis of legal continuity with the republic of 1918-1940 and, as such, reinstated many of the interwar era’s principles governing fields such as military organization (Naigre 2006:...
12). However, changes in how Western democracies regarded civilian-military relations had also changed, and in striving for NATO membership, the country had to conduct civil-military reforms as outlined by NATO. The public debate in the second part of the 1990s was largely concentrated on enhancing civilian control over the military; the main purpose of which is to keep the leal power of the military under the guidance of democratically elected governments and to minimize the possibility of a coup. The official approach to civil–military relations carried characteristics inherent to the Huntingtonian model that, among other things, advocates a large separation between the civilian and military spheres. This focus left little leeway. Estonia’s balance between the military and the civilian society and even hindered public debate on “softer” issues connected to the military, such as families of soldiers. Thus the military and all things military are by and large conceptualized as not a part of the civil society, which is in turn supplemented by the special and separate status of Soviet officers.

The second set of collective and public narratives that emerged from the interviews help us to understand the context of women’s position and identity in the Estonian society. Just as the collective and public narratives of the soldier create tensions in the self-forming process that incorporates soldiering, the next set of narratives does the same with being a woman.

The Dedicated Mother

Estonia has a family policy that in general is considered pro-natalistic, with a long paid parental leave, initially designed as a measure to increase the birth rate in Estonia. Gradually, however, more gender equality and equity principles are being incorporated. The parental leave period is long, up to three years, and half of this period is covered by the parental benefit, which is 100 percent of earnings from a previous period of a predefined length (Karu 2011: 15). It is up to the family whether the mother or the father goes on parental leave; however, the first seventy days are only entitled to mothers. Fathers can take ten working days’ additional paternity leave before or after the birth of a child. This generous policy measure has fed into the preexisting position that taking care of children and domestic chores is mainly the responsibility of mothers (Karu and Kasearu 2011: 26). The share of fathers who go on parental leave is still rather modest (Karu 2011: 22). In addition, as Estonia was reestablished under nation-state ideology, women were extolled for the sex-specific role of replenishing the population (Kaskla 2003: 298–99), also tying into the previously mentioned narrative of independence as the apotheosis of all of Estonian history.

The Hard-Working, Model Employee

Previous studies have shown that paid work and being able to work are important aspects for women’s self-realization and feeling that they are included in society (Pajumets 2007: 56–57). Due to the parental leave policy, it is the norm for mothers to stay at home with their children for the duration of paid parental leave, and they often time the birth of their second child so that they can either continue to stay at home with no interruption in income, or go back to work for only a short period between children. After that, though, mothers are expected to return to the labor market full time, as Estonian employers are reluctant to provide part-time working options. Partly due to that, Estonia has almost the highest rates of employment among mothers with children age three to twelve (Keck and Saraceno 2013: 308). This is reinforced not only by the dual-earner family model as the income subsidies and family allowances after the period of paid parental leave do not cover the absence of parental salary, but also the return of ideological equality that has stemmed from the influence of the Scandinavian equalitarian equality norm and the EU norm we have on gender equality (Kaskla 2003: 300–10). This is supplemented by the narrative of Estonians as a hard-working nation, so women might find themselves locked into the collective narratives of hard-working, model employees.

The Center of the Family

Despite some change, there is a persistent narrative of the sensible Estonian woman supporting her family and husband, of the woman stoically accepting her role (Kaskla 2003: 302–3). The woman plays the significant role of the stabilizer of the family, yet does not have the status as head of the family. This is to a degree supported by the still-prevailing gender identity where nearly half (48 percent) of men and women without children feel that women should be ready to reduce their workload as employees in favor of taking care of the family, and 43 percent of men and women with children support the same idea. Although the previous studies, mostly carried out in the United States, have shown that serving in the military is associated with more traditional family behavior—earlier marriage and more children (Landquist and Smith 2005: 8–9)—in Estonia this association is rather weak (Kangro 2015: 118). It could also mean that spouses of service members are also in other aspects quite similar to the whole female population, and that as far as their identity and self-perception go, the role of being active on the labor market and the main contributor in private life is prevailing over the other aspects.

Finding Our Interviewees

We found our interviewees in two separate waves. The first ten interviews were conducted as part of a graduate-level qualitative methodology course where students were taught interviewing on sensitive subjects. The main themes discussed during interviews were the identity of a military spouse, the differences between military families and civilian families, and the positive and negative experiences of having a spouse on active duty. Students started with a snowball method, introducing and announcing the research project through a Facebook call, which drew a fairly large number of potential participants. We employed the principles of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and keeping the participants exhaustively informed about the interview topic (Kvale 1996: 110–14). Finally, ten of the twenty-five people who were initially interested were interviewed. Several indicated that they would have been comfortable with a standardized digital survey, as they felt the degree of anonymity would be higher. As a reason for nonparticipation, some cited doubt about whether they were in a position to agree to an interview, or whether it should be a decision made together with their spouse, or even whether permission should be sought from the EDF.

This might have been because, more often than not before, the implementation of the Veterans Policy in 2012, media interviews often concentrated on the hardships of veterans and on raising awareness of veterans’ need for more support. The tone of these articles often victimized the veteran and his or her family and also pointed to the shortcomings of the support system in place. Some of the women who refused to participate in the interviews might have felt it inappropriate to participate in a study that might, for all they knew, pursue the same angle.

Those who were concerned more with privacy and anonymity were given the option of participating in written interviews by email. The first wave of data gathering did not achieve data saturation, and thus we proceeded with asking for a recommendation from a colleague at the Estonian National Defence College and continued by asking for further recommendations from the interviewees. The final dataset consists of fourteen interviews with spouses and cohabiting partners of active-duty members. They were all women who either worked or were on three-year parental leave, between the ages of twenty-two and forty-five, with different levels of education ranging from vocational school to a Ph.D. They were all in relationships with an active-duty member, and had been in that relationship for a period of one and a half to fifteen years. Some of the couples had children; some did not.
There were no divorcees or women separated from their partner. In some cases, the interviewees had moved along with their partner relocating because of their job, but in other cases, the service member had asked to be rotated close to home to allow daily or weekend commutes. The interviews were semistructured and conducted from spring 2014 to autumn 2015.

Narratives of Wives or Partners of Professional Military Service Members

In this section, we will discuss the personal identity-forming narratives of the wives and partners of the professional service members of the Estonian Defence Forces.

Usually, we asked the interviewee fairly early in the interview how she would describe her relationship to the military, and all the interviewees pointed out that it was their husband or partner who was in the military and that they themselves had no connection to the military. In this way, they positioned themselves firmly in the civilian sphere. That was the case even with women who either worked as civilians in the military or were members of a voluntary defense organization:

I do not really have a connection to the defense forces, only that I work at the Estonian National Defence College.

Sometimes, being a civilian myself, not connected to the military, creates misunderstandings.

This links up with the narrative of “Closed Off and Separate” as the conventional way of conceptualizing the relationship in society between civilians and the military, but it might also be the product of the way military service personnel are separated from society—they have a perceived position as people who have less agency in their lives—after all, the military can reassign or rotate them from one job to another, and they are barred by law from belonging to a political party:

Well, he is an officer now, so he can be assigned to a different position. So, he has been assigned to different postings in our area; there aren’t too many options left. I don’t know where he is going to be posted. My job is here; he can’t really not accept a posting unless he wants to leave the forces.

Regardless of our interviewees’ self-inspired reasons for seeing themselves as separate from the military sphere, the normative framework established by the laws and social welfare system of Estonia also lead these women to seeing themselves as belonging on the civilian side. This brings up the question of intrafamily power relations, taking into account the collective narrative of the woman as “The Center of the Family” and the family not being considered in the purview of the military.

Secrecy in Life

In describing the life of military families, Wertsch (1991: 33–61) discusses three aspects of military culture that have a bearing on the life of a family where one of the members is in the military: masks of secrecy, normalcy, and denial. Sørensen (2015: S232) calls it “secrecy work,” where past experiences, present conditions, and hopes for the future are masked in concealment and silence. In the narratives of the women we interviewed, the habit of keeping things secret was also evident. However, it was not really seen as something that was particularly disruptive to family life, but rather as a part of the husband’s or partner’s job and something that the women shared in. It was even referred to as something that united the spouses or partners, a pragmatic aspect of family life, and something where one will learn fast enough what is appropriate to say in what situation:

No, not for me . . . . the secrecy doesn’t really bother me. I mean you learn very early on in the relationship that things talked about at home aren’t talked about outside of home. I mean, he talks to me, so I know . . . . it’s something that we share.

One reason that this might not be seen as very disruptive is the Soviet legacy, as during the occupation it was normal for people to watch what was being said in public in fear of repercussions. It is also considered culturally appropriate to be private about one’s family life:

Estonians are not big on talking about personal stuff in public anyway, like if you are sick or have problems. And, as well you remember, back then you knew where to say what and to whom.

Although it has been historically necessary to have very clear public and private life boundaries, the pragmatic attitude toward “secrecy work” might start changing in the globalizing world with the ever-increasing culture of sharing through social media.

Pride and Patriotism

The interviewees invariably found that through their spouse’s or partner’s job, they have either become more patriotic or prouder of the independence of Estonia, something that in the cultural narrative is seen as the apotheosis of all Estonian history. They express this by celebrating Estonian Independence Day and Victory Day, and estimate that they generally know and pay more attention to defense and security issues in Estonia than they did previously:

Living with a professional service member has certainly made me more aware of issues connected to defense. I follow these topics more now than I used to, I have in fact educated myself in this area.

It becomes evident in the course of the interviews that patriotism plays a prominent role in the formation of their identity as wives or partners of professional military service members. It is equally clear that they position themselves on the civilian side by bringing up comparisons of how the same kind of patriotism is also displayed among families that do not have any connection to the military:

We have not missed any Independence Day celebrations, not one, but this is not something special, not because I am married to someone from the military. I know many families, not connected to the military, that do the same thing. Going out for the raising of the flag at sunrise, the parade, a nice dinner: Freedom is not self-evident.

We see these women invoking simultaneously a cultural and public narrative where they fit in, but also positioning themselves at one end of the patriotism continuum. This resonates well with Bamberg’s (2011: 9) story prerequisite that stories should not deviate from the perceived norm too much, but should still be different enough to be told. We can also follow the strategic narrative (Nissen 2015: 65) of comprehensive national defense—for example, the national defense paradigm involves the preparation and readiness of society as a whole, not only the defense structures, equating knowledge with better preparedness. Being aware and knowing defense and security issues supports preparedness, but also encourages the realization that this independence is something to be celebrated and commemorated.

As narratives often include not only the story of the protagonist, other characters were introduced to highlight the pride the interviewees felt that came with their husband’s or spouse’s chosen career through others. For example, in one story, a young child in a grocery store pointed at the uniform of the interviewee’s husband, thus expressing joy at seeing an officer. Other stories tell of bank loans or insurance cases being handled with exceptional speed and efficiency due to their husband or partner being in the military.

These stories are told from the perspective of the interviewees being recipients of these benefits by proxy—that is, they...
themselves as wives or spouses of military service members would not have invited such behavior on the part of others. These were not stories of entitlement but of heartfelt pride that the career choice of their husbands was being valued on the social level. This ties in well with societal recognition and valorization (1996: 92-130) sees it—namely, that it takes place in the conversational space, and moves beyond words to deeds (Warming 2015: 251).

However, the importance of preserving the nation’s independence is also of central value. It is self-evident for our interviewees that it is a point of loyalty on their part that they take pride in the knowledge that their spouses or partners will be the ones fighting to preserve independence in case of war. This could also be interpreted as stoicism in the face of adversity, which Wertsch (1991: 33–61) defines as one of the key values defining military culture.

The knowledge that their husbands and partners will be the ones who will stay and fight for the independence of Estonia if such a need arises carries with it an intense sense of pride and, to an extent, the spirit of sacrifice for a greater goal:

I know that he is going to be here, fighting for our freedom, if things should come to that. I am an Estonian patriot, what can I say? I am proud that he is going to stay when so many others are going to be crowding the boats to get out of here.

Able, Capable, and Persevering

Regardless of the social recognition experienced by the wives and partners of the military service members in some instances—where the positive image of the soldier as someone dependable and trustworthy is prevalent—there are also instances where the cultural narratives of the “dim-witted” and untrustworthy Soviet soldier still arise. Though fading among today’s younger generations, it is evident among older generations:

In the beginning I was ashamed for my friends. Actually appalled, all these jokes about not being able to think, only following orders. I had to apologize to him in front of my friends, then it finally eased. It is like they couldn’t understand that it is someone’s choice to become a professional soldier:

He sort of didn’t dare to tell my parents that he is a professional service member. Maybe he was afraid what they’d think of him. [Questions like] why the army, you know, what kind of a choice is that?

Negative attitudes had been encountered by most of the interviewees not only among friends and family members upon first introducing their spouse or partner, but also among professionals and specialists, such as a midwife criticizing the father for not being there for the birth of his child:

I went into labor, got to the hospital and said that my husband is deployed. And that I was giving birth alone. They treated me like I was a single parent, like my child didn’t have a father. I tried to pay it no mind . . . but the attitude from the doctors was exactly the same. It was uncomfortable to be at the hospital.

The latter strongly speaks to the rapid change that has taken place concerning customs and values connected to giving birth and the part that men play now. Even in the 1980s, birth was in most cases strictly the domain of doctors and other medical staff. Fathers and family members were not allowed into the maternity ward.

However drastic the narrated incidents, almost all of the interviewees assumed that these situations arose from people not understanding the military way of life or what being on active duty demanded from those serving in the military. Interestingly, the service members’ partners themselves noted that their friends and acquaintances generally sympathized with the active-duty military personnel, as they are perceived as leading hard lives—unlike teachers, they have to be completely away from their family. This sympathy for active-duty personnel suggests a cultural narrative where the woman is the one who has to shoulder the work of running the household, yet the man is the one who gets the sympathy for being deprived of a cozy existence, of hearth and home:

I’m a teacher, people know and respect me for what I do, but they sort of pity him, because he has to spend so much time away from home and the kids.

The unplannable nature of everyday life was also narrated: plans often have to be revised and cancelled. This results in distance from friends and acquaintances, and the family finds it is unable—or indifferent—to attend various get-togethers. As discussed above, home and child-rearing is part of the female domain, but following independence, one of the new traditions that has become difficult to navigate for single mothers is Father’s Day, celebrated on the second Sunday in November. It has become customary on these days to have celebrations in kindergartens and schools where fathers are invited for a breakfast or to talk about their work and life. This new custom has proven somewhat uncomfortable, as often the husbands or partners of our interviewees could not attend the celebrations. In addition, there seemed to be a prevalent desire not to make an issue of any difficulties that military families might experience due to the demands that the military way of life places on them—a sign of stoicism and denial, according to Wertsch (1991: 33-61).

There was a strong belief among the interviewees that they can overcome all the challenges because they are capable and independent; at the same time, it was noted that, in reality, this demands a great deal of resources from them and their family. Single motherhood is still considered a stigma, and this resonates through the interviews. Public debate around single motherhood is ongoing. In 2017, heated debate arose over the status of single mothers in light of a foundation’s policy of allowing only married women to be nominated for a prominent “Mother of the Year” award. In addition, there is a relatively high rate of child poverty (Toots, Reetz, and Jahn 2014: 3), which is connected to the fact that the income subsidies and family allowances do not cover the absence of a parental salary. This means that the wellbeing of families is based on a dual-earner family model, where in order to attain the average standard of living, both parents have to be employed on a full-time basis. Thus, women’s employment plays an important role in the material wellbeing of families, but also in their identity. The interviews revealed that for women, especially for those with university degrees, their own career and employment were significant status symbols, which also helped them to strengthen their position in the civilian world.

“We Are No Different”

In 2007, Estonia’s Peacekeeping Operations Centre’s Social and Psychological Support Section began developing a system to tackle the issues connected to military deployments abroad. During that period, the term “deployment family” was coined, and a Deployment Family Program was set up to help families before, during, and after deployment (Truusa 2010: 46). The Veterans Policy adopted in 2012 also devoted attention to the families of veterans, but during Veterans Day on April 23, the attention and emphasis continues to mainly be on veterans and to a much lesser degree on the people that surround the veterans. The Estonian definition is fairly exclusive, as Dundek et al. (2006: 162–94) define it, encompassing mostly military service members who have been deployed, but the wives and partners of military service members whose husbands have not been deployed lack a conceptual framework for positioning. Instead, other possible reference groups are sought, and it can also be said that, to a certain degree, relief is found in positioning oneself in the civilian framework, namely that of the wives and partners of workers who have migrated to other European countries for employment. This correlates with a study conducted in Estonia in 2013-14 showing that 22 percent of the parents of children attending second, fourth, and sixth grade have either one or both parents working abroad (Talves 2013: 48). The specifics of deployment notwithstanding, the women see themselves as less unique than it might be conventionally presumed.

At the same time, even during deployments, there is a tendency to use the internet support forum, which was created by
the EDF’s Family Support Program for deploying soldiers and their families, mostly for pragmatic reasons, such as exchanging information about the beginning of the mid-deployment vacation, the best way to send packages, etc. (Trusson and Sipline 2015). Otherwise, there is a tendency to rely on one’s family and friends for support during the deployment cycle—even to the extent of trying to avoid other deployment families, as it is felt that interaction with other families who either have someone deployed or who have someone serving as a professional in the military might compound feelings of stress or irrational fear, whereas being surrounded by one’s friends and family allows for a larger degree of normalcy, keeping the focus on the mundane and everyday issues:

I knowingly did not want to interact with other women who had men deployed. I got more support from friends—they would sometimes just hang out with the kids. They’d say: just leave the kids here, go give yourself some space, go have cake and coffee at a café or have a chat with friends. They just took me as a friend whose husband is away. Didn’t try to give me advice or tell me how to live my life.

Again, the parallel of migrant workers is palpable, as these workers often are builders who for the duration of the construction season live abroad:

So tell me how we’re so different, or where do you draw the line? There are people who work abroad for six months at a time, there are the builders, and there are doctors and truckers. Deployments are a part of his job. I am also away with my job.

One of the reasons why this parallel is fairly persistent is that Estonia joined the EU in 2004, and by 2007, when the term “deployment family” was coined, migration of seasonal workers to neighboring EU countries had become a desired state and fairly common—much more so than, for example, being deployed, as Estonian contingents that deployed were small in relation to the size of the force.

Deployment as a Family Decision

Unlike in some armies, in the EDF deploying is voluntary and, as such, is seen as something that the family decides together. Moreover, in the EDF, the same rules of the civilian world, while applied to the Military Service Act, parents who have children three years and younger can only be deployed with the parents’ consent. In fact, all deployments are ultimately voluntary, meaning that they most probably are family decisions and need to be negotiated:

It is absolutely a family decision. I mean, even if I know that it’s part of his job, the “when” was still up to us. We agreed that he’d deploy only after the kids are old enough that they have actual memories of their dad. That’s how it happened too.

Furthermore, once the decision that the family member is going to deploy is reached, it becomes difficult to criticize the system or the support offered to the families through the Deployment Family Program. Deployment is seen as a normal part of a soldier’s career and also a principle of equality. Allowing for career advancement for either of the partners is seen as the norm, and only very small children are viewed as a possible argument against joining a deployment at that particular time.

Conclusion

With regard to their relationship to the military, the women we had the privilege to interview demonstrated acceptance, ambiguity, ambivalence, and entanglement in their narrations. The research process revealed a misunderstanding among researchers of Estonian women with military service members for spouses or partners has been strongly influenced by data gathered in the United States. Perhaps the most significant was understanding how the fact that Estonia lacks some of the concepts so readily used in the academic literature—such as “military family” and “military spouse”—both limits and opens up the negotiations of identity in the narratives as wives and partners of professional military service members. Berger and Luckmann (1991: 53) point out that the words and meanings that we have readily available about the reality we experience for our present and future actions provide us with “a ready-made possibility for the on-going objectification” of our continuously developing experience. Language also typifies experiences, but if one lacks categories and concepts in the language to describe one’s experience, one has to find categories that are available. An example of such a category is the wife of a Finnish builder. The partners of the Defence Forces members indicated they were aware of the differences between such professions and that of a soldier, yet comparisons between the case of a soldier and that of an Estonian builder working in Finland are quite common, and this is true in our dataset as well. These women apparently chose a comparison group that is perhaps better understood in society, or at least more common than a professional soldier serving on a mission. At the same time, overlooking the specifics of the soldier’s profession may be related to denial or stoicism. This can also be seen in their positioning patterns vis-à-vis the civilian-military axis, stressing their adherence to some military values but at the same time emphasizing their own position as civilians. It is also important to take into account that after regaining independence, Estonia began single-mindedly pursuing membership in the EU and NATO. The discussions on the topic of civil–military relations that reached the public concentrated mostly on the establishing of civilian control over the armed forces of the country, in accordance with principles of Western democracy. There was little scope in the public discourse to accommodate topics such as the families of professional soldiers and their place in society.

The interviewees were ambivalent about the topic of civil–military entanglement and perceived limits to what they felt they could talk about. Although these women perceive themselves as belonging to the civilian rather than military world, they face questions of confidentiality and uncertainty. The situation is complicated by their loyalty to their partner/husband.

The emergent collective narrative of the wives or partners of professional military service members accepts the positive recognition and patriotism as also applying to them and their whole family, but when coping with difficulties, solidarity with the civilian society is stressed. In other words, the cultural narrative of the “Fight for Freedom” and “Independence as the Apotheosis of Estonian History” is accepted as the leading narrative and used to position oneself as a protagonist aligned with the military. At the same time, when coping with everyday matters, strong alignment with the civilian society is stressed: support during difficult periods is expected from and also given by the personal support networks. Thus, in conclusion, we submit that in Estonia, the military finds its way into the lives of the wives and partners of professional military service members in more ways than just the uniforms and ruck sacks in the corner, or in the form of absence during military exercises and deployments. Although we are used to thinking about the military and the civilian society standing apart, it is evident that there is entanglement; and military values are respected and to a degree adhered to by the women we interviewed. Perhaps because of the historical context, these military values of stoicism and secrecy are similar to the values in Estonian society in general.

Acknowledgments

We would like to extend our gratitude to the University of Tartu Associate Professor in Social Policy Judit Strömpl and her students, who in autumn 2014 conducted the interviews in the framework of the course “Research Methods and Research Methodology.” The students who served as interviewees were Elisse Salla, Elin Kütt, Felika Tsul, Greten Söö, Marje Reimund, Johanna Toplaan, Margit Metsmägin, Maarika Masikas, and Helina Paat.
References


