

**Unpacking the Self: Exploring How Spouses of Trauma-Exposed Professionals Struggling
with Post-Trauma Symptoms Navigate a Sense of Personal Identity**

By Jessica Buss
BCYC MacEwan University 2019

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS
in the Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies

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We acknowledge and respect the lək'wəŋən peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands and the Songhees, Esquimalt, and WSÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

How spouses of Trauma Exposed Professionals struggling with post-trauma symptoms navigate a sense of personal identity, and the mechanisms by which identity is processed and understood, is largely underrepresented within the literature. The current study examined the ways in which five TExP spouses, whose partners were struggling with post-trauma symptoms, actively navigated identity in these contexts, including the agentic and intentional mechanisms they employed in their navigation. Participants shared their personal experiences with the researcher, who then collated and co-constructed those experiences into six themes: 1) the experience of identifying as the ‘protector’ and 2) identifying as the ‘preventor’ (embodying one or both of these roles in an effort to mitigate/manage damage and protect); 3) the importance of seeing self as more than the singular role of ‘spouse’; 4) engaging others outside of oneself in order to access new perspectives on selfhood; 5) recognizing that one’s own needs are important and valuable; and 6) the experience of having one’s needs take a backseat role.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction to the Topic

“Trauma”, and the multiplicity of experiences and dynamics encapsulated therein, has gained increasing recognition and attention within both professional communities and the public. Numerous books, scientific journals, research studies, professional trainings, and podcasts cover the overwhelming effects and impacts of encountering trauma, and the ways in which relational connections can bear the wounds of trauma symptomology. The relational and personal consequences of living alongside a loved one actively experiencing trauma symptomology have been examined from a variety of disciplines, all seeking to understand the challenges inherent within such relationality. However, the impact on *identity* - the various ways in which one’s self identifies - for those intimately connected to someone chronically exposed to traumatic events through regular work duties and suffering from post-trauma symptoms, has yet to be explored.

The experience of identity fusion for the spouse of the active member through the various ‘spouse-of’ constructs (e.g., “police-spouse”, “military-spouse”) has been anecdotally reported, within many of these trauma exposed professions (T. Black, 2023, Personal Communication). In this study, I sought to explore how the presence or importance of maintaining an independent sense of self, apart from the spousal responsibility/connection to the active member experiencing trauma symptomology, presents itself within the lived experiences of such spouses. I am interested in how spouses of Trauma Exposed Professionals (TEPs) navigate and define their identities within such a relational context and the ways in which identity is impacted by the construct ‘spouse-of’.

To clarify, this study will utilize the term ‘spouse’ as a general categorization for an intimate/romantic partnership in which cohabitation has occurred for at least one year. Although the term ‘partner’ is most often used colloquially to denote such a status, within this particular subset of occupations the term ‘partner’ can often refer to one’s work-place professional teammate (e.g., police partner, military squad partner, etc.); as such, to avoid confusion, the term ‘spouse’ will be utilized to refer to an intimate partnership, but it does not necessitate that there has been a formal marriage.

Statement of the Problem

There are several professions in which members are routinely and chronically exposed to trauma in the course of their regular work duties. Historically, the impact of career-related trauma exposure has been studied from a profession-specific (e.g., police, military etc.) lens, seeking to identify themes and experiences in relation to the specific job details and career categorization. However, as the symptomology associated with PTSD is consistent across professions, despite the exact details of the exposure (Herman, 1995) being different, grouping the chronic trauma exposure experienced by TExp’s – for the purpose of understanding the experiences of those intimately connected to them – provides for a common ‘denominator’ in understanding their experiences. I am interested in the ways in which identity is impacted when one is intimately connected to a TExp, the presence/interference of the construct ‘spouse of’, and the importance of an independent sense of identity outside of this label/role.

Navigating the complexity of intimate relationality with a partner experiencing trauma symptomology holds a myriad of challenges. There are bodies of literature that investigate the correlation of trauma exposure and intimate partner violence (Gerlock et al., 2014; ; Marshall et al., 2005; Meffert et al., 2014; Misca & Forgey, 2017; Taft et al., 2013; Teten et al., 2009;

Williston, 2015; Wolf et al., 2013), the experiences of caregiver burden (Calhoun et al., 2002; Skomorovsky et al., 2017), and secondary traumatic stress (Ahmadi et al., 2011; Landers et al., 2020; Meffert et al., 2014; Roberts & Levinson, 2001) amongst spouses of trauma-impacted individuals. All of these studies speak to the question of ‘what it’s like to be a spouse of’; however, it would seem that no one has asked this population how they perceive and navigate an independent sense of identity external to their connection to the TExp, not merely because of trauma symptomology but because of the implicit and, at times explicit, demands for spousal support inherent in these professions.

Numerous resources and support programs are allocated to the wellbeing of the TExp, and the spouses are primarily viewed for the ways in which they can provide support to the TExp. Programs that seek to assist spouses of TExPs often position the spouses as active members of their TExp’s ‘support team’, valuing the spouse as a resource for the TExp, rather than as an independent entity in need of support for their own wellbeing (Dekel et al., 2018). Spousal ‘wellness’ is often approached from the understanding that the more solid the foundation is ‘at home’ for the TExp, the more able the TExp will be in accomplishing their respective duties; spouses are often conceptualized as extensions of the professional, orbiting the relational minefield of trauma symptomology and its intersections with relational/family dynamics (Beks, 2016; Eubanks, 2013; Park, 2011; Stuttaford, 2020; Ziff & Garland-Jackson, 2020).

In the relational orbits within which spouses often find themselves in these contexts, conceptualizations of identity— how one understands and navigates one’s identity or identities — is an area of interest that has been given little attention in the literature. Diverse disciplines concern themselves with explorations of the self; philosophers contemplate the nature of the self’s situatedness within one’s realities and experiences; theologians contemplate the self’s

experience of, and connection to, spirit and connectedness; quantum physicists explore the reality of ‘self’ and consciousness and the ways in which the self identifies within time and space; psychologists are fascinated by the construction of self and the ways in which the psyche and ecosystem interact to formulate identities. The main activity of a self is to ‘identify’ and hence, understanding and exploring identity is integral to human wellbeing and engagement with the world; the self is the center of the human experience and the self, as its primary action, identifies ‘as’ something. Dedicating time and intention to understanding how TExP spouses navigate a sense of identity/identities is vitally important for honouring their wellbeing and determining ways to better support their lived experiences in their own right, seeking to better understand the unique positionalities encapsulated therein.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore a gap in the literature regarding how TExP spouses navigate a sense of identity and the relative benefit/importance of maintaining an independent sense of identity, separate from identifying as a ‘spouse of’) within this relational landscape. Although the literature speaks to the mental health and relational consequences of maintaining this ‘spouse of’ position, exploring experiences of caregiver burden (Calhoun et al., 2002; Skomorovsky et al., 2017), secondary traumatic stress (Ahmadi et al., 2011; Landers et al., 2020; Meffert et al., 2014; Roberts & Levinson, 2001), ambiguous loss (Kent, 2013; Kirschman, 2018), and intimate partner violence (Marshall et al., 2005; Misca & Forgey, 2017; Taft et al., 2013; Teten et al., 2009; Wolf et al., 2013), the literature does not speak to *how* spouses come to navigate identity, and what mechanisms factor into how they identify in these contexts. Considering the relational nature of identity construction, living alongside an intimate partner experiencing the effects of chronic trauma exposure takes its toll on the spouse’s sense of

wellbeing and navigating a sense of identity within the Trauma Exposed Professions such as police, fire, military etc. may be particularly challenging for spouses due to the high demands for identification with their spouses' professions. Investigating concepts of identity within the spousal experience may facilitate the acquisition of valuable insight into the ways in which this population can better be supported.

My hope for this study is that it will further expand the existing literature surrounding the experiences of identity of TExP spouses, promoting the wellbeing of this population for their own sake, rather than as a pillar of strength and support solely for the good of the TExP. My hope is that the identity experiences of spouses of TExP will no longer reside in the margins of TExP 'wellness' conversations, but will begin to be honoured and amplified within these communities. As such, the question guiding this research inquiry is: How do spouses of trauma exposed professionals who are dealing with the effects of trauma, navigate a sense of personal identity, separate from the 'spouse of' role?

To approach this research question transparently and openly, it is imperative that the researcher position themselves in relation to the research, naming the ways in which this positionality will intersect and impact the research at hand.

Researcher Positionality

The questions of 'with whom' and 'for whom' within research have impacted me greatly, as I consider the implications of my intended research. I appreciate Dillard's (2000) assertion that a researcher must engage in the exploration of personal location and positionality each time they begin a new research inquiry; rather than maintain the fallacy of 'neutrality', I am intimately connected to my research, subjectively positioned based upon my social location. The history of educational research demonstrates the tragic consequences of research conducted from a place of

unexamined privilege and the oppressive power of such research when it is propagated as ‘truth’ (Patel, 2018). It is necessary within my own process of examining my social location to recognize the “settler socialization” (Allen, 2020, p. 379) that I have experienced, and continue to experience, that has centered my Whiteness as the ‘standard’ at the expense of others. The acknowledgment of my positionality involves an honest reflection that the power systems in place act in solidarity with the uncontested norm of my White identity, and that failing to acknowledge these systems of inequity that have served me further perpetuates the centering of White normativity in research.

The fact that I am in a position to conduct research within a colonial institution demonstrates the ways in which my privilege – both my White racial identity and socioeconomic status – has afforded me opportunities to maintain my position of power and contribute to the dissemination of ‘knowledge’. Asking the question that Milner (2007) poses of ‘How do I know [what I know]?’ (p. 395), is a step towards honoring the multiplicity of truth and knowledge by examining the basis from which my sense of ‘truth’ emerges. As a White, female, cis-gender, settler living within a middle-class socioeconomic bracket, I bring these identities to the lens through which I understand stories and societal narratives. The biased lens through which I interpret the world must be at the foreground of my research and relayed with transparency in my work and writings. To further challenge and disrupt White, colonial normativity in research, humility and gentle curiosity must be central to my discussions. When compiling my literature review, it is imperative that I engage the literature with a critical lens, paying careful attention to the location of the authors and the bias through which the research may emerge. I have been socialized into a system that has encouraged my trust in the dominant narratives provided to me

within existing research; it is in critically reflecting on the research that I consume and circulate that a decolonial step forward can be taken.

As I consider my research interest regarding the identity construction and differentiation of spouses of Trauma Exposed Professionals (TExp) - military, police, firefighters, medical personnel - I must consider the intersections of cultural identity, societal narratives and expectations, and gender bias within these spousal experiences. Explicitly naming and exploring the power of such intersections with my participants may be a focused step towards decentering my own biased lens and empowering alternative realities. With my own experiences as a 'military child', witnessing the impact of military trauma on my own parents' partnership, my interest in the topic arises from a desire to uncover what might have been helpful within my mother's experience and identity construction as a 'spouse-of' within the military culture. I come from a background in which possession of a strong, differentiated identity was an important factor of wellness, and so in exploring these narratives of identity with TExp spouses this bias was important to acknowledge (to the best of my ability), in order to be open to the diverse and possibly different realities of the participants.

My understanding of 'wellness' is intricately woven into individuality and celebration of a strong sense of personal identity; honoring diverse conceptualizations of health and differentiation was an important consideration as I embarked on this research topic. Rather than approach the research inquiry as 'research on' or 'research for' the participants, reconceptualizing the process as 'research with' helped to further decentralize my bias and privileged/powerful positionality as researcher. I am both a custodian of, and a contributor to the research; the results and the process are both collaborative endeavors in co-creating the narratives shared as I asked questions, and reflect my understanding of participants' narratives.

Collaboratively determining appropriate ways to utilize the research outcomes and share these outcomes through knowledge mobilization with the community is a valuable step in the process.

Overview of the Thesis

The study will first situate this research project within the existing literature. Chapter 2 will provide an overview of the existing research that speaks to the concepts and theories that form the basis upon which this research will build and Chapter 3 will explore the methodology utilized to conduct the research, followed by Chapter 4 in which the results obtained by these methodological procedures will be presented. Finally, Chapter 5 will discuss the ways in which these findings support the existing literature and/or illuminate new and unique findings within the field.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Scores of studies in the literature explicate the complex human response to traumatic exposure and the toll it extracts from the human body and mind. Trauma can weave itself into the very fabric of our relational centres and capacities, interfering with – and in many ways directly combating – our ability to remain in a connected and reciprocal dance of relationality. Trauma tends to ‘sink its claws into the relationships’ around the impacted person, causing a ripple effect to those surrounding or adjacent to ‘patient zero’ (i.e., the trauma-exposed individual).

Professionals routinely exposed to traumatic events (i.e., TExP’s) are forced to navigate the complexities of managing the residual impact of such exposure. For example, a well-understood consequence of such exposure is the inevitability of service members ‘bringing home’ the trauma as they attempt to manage the resultant behaviours and social/emotional adjustments. What is less understood within the literature is the ways in which *spouses* of service members who are routinely exposed to trauma are impacted by the trauma symptomology and behaviours in the home, particularly the ways in which trauma impacts how the spouses navigate a sense of personal identity. A common result of trauma symptomology in the home is that the trauma becomes a central presence around which household rhythms and routines orbit, centralizing the experiences and behaviours of the trauma-exposed family member and oftentimes neglecting the needs and wellbeing of the remaining family members (Adamsons et al., 2022; Marini et al., 2018; Paley et al., 2013). What can occur is that the spouse’s identity becomes one of ‘adjacent-to’ the trauma, sometimes depicted as a ‘spouse of’ (i.e., ‘military spouse’, ‘police spouse’), centralizing their identity as an extension of the TExP and casting them in a role of ‘other’ (Landers et al., 2020; Porter & Henrikson, 2016; Voris, 2019). Understanding the ways in which spouses of TExP’s navigate their sense of personal identity has

been given minimal attention in the literature thus far and deserves greater exploration, given that one's identity is a vital component of wellbeing. The current study explores how spouses of TExPs navigate a sense of personal identity, how their identities are affected by their intimate relationships with a TExP, and whether holding an independent sense of identity – separate from 'spouse of' – is an important component of wellbeing. To best approach engaging with the lived experiences of people within this demographic in a gentle, caring, and informed manner, exploring the existing literature surrounding identity navigation, relational dynamics following trauma exposure, documented experiences of spouses of TExP (including caregiver burden, secondary traumatic stress, parenting challenges, and domestic violence) is essential.

To situate this research within the existing literature, it is important to outline the methods with which the literature review was conducted, explicating search terms and engines that I utilized in an effort to ground myself within the existing studies. The term 'Trauma Exposed Professional' is not a common categorization in the literature to date, highlighting the necessity within my literature review to investigate a variety of professions within this category (e.g., firefighting, law-enforcement, military, healthcare, and emergency services) and their interactions with spousal identity/well-being. Hence, using Google Scholar, EBSCO host and APA PsychInfo, my initial search terms were as follows: ("spousal identity" OR "spousal wellbeing" OR "spouse" OR "partner") AND (military OR firefighting OR paramedics OR "law-enforcement" OR healthcare). This initial search yielded further avenues for exploration, as it became clear that most research in this area primarily examined spousal experiences of caregiver burden and secondary traumatic stress. From there, I utilized research terms such as: ("caregiver burden" OR "secondary traumatic stress") AND ("military spouses" OR partners OR relationship). Results demonstrated that most research within this domain focuses on the spousal

experiences as they relate to roles and family dynamics as well as domestic violence. The following literature review will explore the existing research in this area, explicating the gap in the literature that exists around the related concepts of ‘self’ and identity within this population.

Self and Identity

To coherently engage in a discussion regarding concepts of self and identity within this context, this literature review will first introduce the ways in which this study defines each of those terms. Discourse surrounding self and identity is vast, yet a common understanding of these concepts remains elusive, as varying fields = define these elements differently.

The processes by which the self is defined and constructed has been, and continues to be, the subject of great philosophical and psychological inquiry. Theoretical conceptualizations of self are vast, seeking to define the self, in order to grasp the ways in which the self may be better understood and shaped. Ingersoll and Cook-Greuter (2007) offer a model, based on Wilber (2000), for understanding the self as situated within a system, constructed by the developmental stages one progresses through and the environmental determinants therein. This model is metaphorically represented as the ‘ladder, climber, view’, whereby the climber (i.e., the self) gains increasingly complex understandings of self-in-relation, as they ascend the ladder (i.e., developmental progression). The climber’s view (i.e., perspective) on each rung of the ladder is defined by the developmental capacities inherent within that rung (Ingersoll & Cook-Greuter, 2007). Next, it is important to understand that ‘selves identify’ as their primary action. As the ‘self’ progresses up the ladder, it disidentifies with the previous rung it once stood on and identifies with its current rung, fundamentally forming a sense of identity in the process. As the self’s awareness of its relationship to the environment increases, the self is more readily equipped to differentiate what was once thought of as *embedded* in the self to, instead, become

objects of awareness (e.g., statements such as “*I am not ‘sadness’, rather sadness is an emotion that I am aware of experiencing*”, or “*I am not a body, a body is something that I possess*”). Put plainly, and fundamentally-speaking, the self identifies. What is known in the literature and society at large is the basic premise that individuals and collectives strive towards attaining and maintaining personal identities. Prominent personality psychologists assert that developing a sense of identity is foundational to psychological wellbeing (for example Lecky, 1945; Maslow, 1954; Rogers, 1951). This developing identity does not occur within a vacuum; the differentiation of self emerges through interpersonal relations within one’s environment (Baumeister, 2011; Ingersoll & Greuter, 2007). As such, the understanding and construction of self and identity is a lifelong process that is simultaneously developmental (nature) and socially constructed (nurture). Understanding self as relationally and socially constructed, and understanding that ‘*selves identity*’ positions the ongoing relational experiences in one’s life as integral to the evolving understanding of self and, subsequently, one’s sense of personal ‘*identity*’.

The terms ‘*self*’ and ‘*identity*’ are frequently used interchangeably and yet often remain ambiguous in their definition and differentiation from the other (Cote & Levine, 2002). In respect to the Cook-Greuter and Ingersoll’s ladder-climber view model, as the self progresses up the ladder of development, gaining further exposure to intra- and interpersonal contexts and environments, it begins to assume and possess a set of qualities, attempting to establish continuity over time with the formation of an ‘*identity*’. The amalgamation of experiences, memories, values, and relationships situate the self to ask the basic human question that reverberates throughout human history: ‘*Who am I?*’. This existential query motivates the self to seek roles and characteristics through which it can define itself by (i.e., *identity*), thereby

constructing a coherent sense of identity or identities. The act of identifying, of holding identities, is fundamentally what a self does; the self identifies and continues to identify, in pursuit of expressing itself and attaining a sense of continuity in such expression. The identity inherent within the difference between ‘doing’ and ‘being’ is that ‘doing’ can encompass a multitude of behaviours the self does and environmental happenings that the self experiences, while ‘being’ (“I am”) speaks to the identity as something or somethings in particular.

The creation of an identity and the ways in which the self constructs various identities, has been approached from a multitude of theoretical frameworks such as psychosocial (Erikson, 1997), cultural (Chirkov & Sheldon, 2011; Smith, 2011; Willis, 2012), religious (King, 2003; Oppong, 2013), socioeconomic status (Destin et al, 2017) and gender (Cerezo et al., 2020; Renk & Creasey, 2003). The base similarity within each of these models of identity formation is the central element of self-in-relationship to/with another. Whether a self is in relationship with the physical or metaphysical, the basis of identity is intricately tied to both kinship with and differentiation from an ‘other’. Generally, society considers identity to be situated within the self’s meaning-based roles (spouse, dentist, caretaker), association with particular groups (religions affiliations, cultural origins, sporting teams), or unique traits and characteristics that define the individual (athletic, musical, intelligent) (Stets & Surpe, 2013). Understanding the ways in which the self identifies, and the meaning that is subsequently attached to and negotiated within the self and the environment, is the primary focus within many identity frameworks (Stets & Surpe, 2013).

Marriage and cohabitation have been identified as a dynamic factor in one’s ongoing construction of identity. Soulsby and Bennett (2017) suggest a theoretical framework which understands there to be a “reciprocal relationship between self and society” (p. 359), with

identity emerging at the intersection of one's private identity (a differentiated understanding of who one is apart from the collective) and collective identity (one's relational connection to groups and society), with the private identity informed by one's engagement with the collective. As one's collective identity is impacted by the relationships they have within their environmental context (the roles they assume, their association with group norms and beliefs), one's private identity, their differentiated understanding of the characteristics of 'who I am', is influenced by the intimacy of cohabitation and marriage (Soulsby & Bennett, 2017).

Identity has thus been conceptualized as a "social product" (Burke & Reitzes, 2016, p. 84), symbolic of the role-based meaning construction facilitated by the environmental feedback the individual receives, as a result of their roles and behaviours (Burke & Reitzes, 2016). Here it is important to understand that one may enact a role, but not identify with that role, such that roles are not necessarily embedded in identity. As individuals take up a variety of roles and the behaviours associated therein, the self can be understood as constructed of (or possessing) multiple identities, each influenced by the relational environment, yet differentiated in accordance with the unique variety of roles they embody. The self is therefore not seen as an autonomous entity (constructing itself in isolation, unimpacted by the structures surrounding it) but rather as a socially constructed embodiment of the multiple roles one occupies in relation to others (Hogg & White, 1995). One can see then begin to see how confusing it can be to clearly understand the constructs of self, role, and identity, when used in such different ways by various authors. When examined within the context of the role of 'spouse', identity is constructed (and co-constructed) by the roles taken on within the relational expectations and intimacy of this partnership and one may enact the role of spouse, but not necessarily have that as one's primary identity. However, as greater meaning is attributed to this dyadic identity and relationship, one's

self can become highly identified with the identity of ‘spouse’ and the roles and responsibilities therein (Soulsby & Bennett, 2017).

Social identity theory (SIS) is a social psychological theory which posits that the self formulates identity based upon the continual categorization of their belonging (or lack of belonging) to/within a group (Tajfel, 1978; Trepte & Loy, 2017), which is another way of saying ‘selves identify’. The conceptualization of one’s value within groups, and the comparison of such value in relation to others, impacts the formation of self-esteem (and identity) and modulates one’s comfortability with differentiating oneself within such groups. Once again, the self is viewed as being situated relationally and is developed by the social connections and structures in which it engages and with which it identifies.

A differentiated sense of self, or sense of personal identity, has been cited in the literature as an important developmental component in establishing a healthy balance between interconnection/dependence and independence; the interpersonal dimension of self-differentiation “involves experiencing both intimacy and autonomy as enhancing and balancing experiences in a relationship” (Kapel et al., 2020, p. 3). As such, differentiation does not suggest the lack of connection to and relational influence of others and one’s roles therein but rather a nuanced ability to remain connected to one’s social environment while maintaining ‘boundaried’ emotional regulation. Establishing this balance allows the individual to engage in intimate relational connections while not risking the loss of self (i.e., loss of personal identity) through fusion with others.

It is important to make note of diverse cultural conceptualizations and implications of identity, and the common understanding of the disparity between a collectivist and individualist approach to identity. Although cultural models may differ in the celebration and pursuit of

individuated ‘identity’, communities are irrefutably constructed of individuals. For a self with a clear sense of identity to derive meaning and connection within a group (seeking to achieve, and valuing, a ‘collective identity’), there first needs to exist a separate self with which the individual can identify, and experience a sense of inclusion and meaning within the collective. If there is no “I” from which the feeling of “we” can emerge, there can exist no collective, as it is the “I’s” that contribute to the collective understanding and experience of the “we”. The differences then between a Westernized, individualistic conceptualization of self, versus a collectivist approach to self/identity, perhaps lies within the degree to which the self identifies (or interprets value and meaning) with its contribution to the greater wellbeing and harmony of the collective. One could argue that this difference is positioned within the ways in which the self identifies in relation to community, if this application is more strongly directed towards a capitalistic, individual, power-over position, or towards that of the collective good and community wellbeing. The current study does not seek to comment on the disparity between the influences on identity from a collectivist or individualist cultural standpoint, but deems it necessary to name these varying cultural approaches to identity and note the influences that such cultural values may have on the ways in which participants navigate their identity amidst the challenges of being a TExP.

The contexts within which the self exists (e.g., cultural affiliation/norms, gender identity, geographic location) are intricately connected to the ways in which the self navigates identity and the relational connection and dynamics held therein. Living alongside a professional who is routinely exposed to trauma may impact one’s sense of self and identity, especially considering the nature of trauma symptomology and its impact on the surrounding relationships.

Trauma Exposed Professionals

The definition of ‘trauma’ within popular culture can vary in its intensity and duration. Some authors propose that there exists both ‘little t’ and ‘big T’ traumatic experiences and events that impact one’s capacity to engage with the world. However, in accordance with the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual V (DSM V), a traumatic event is more strictly defined as: exposure to death, threatened death, actual or threatened serious injury, or actual or threatened sexual violence, in the following way(s):

- Direct exposure
- Witnessing the trauma
- Learning that a relative or close friend was exposed to a trauma
- Indirect exposure to aversive details of the trauma, usually in the course of professional duties (e.g., first responders, medics)

Therefore, a Trauma Exposed Professional (TExp) is defined as any professional, who in the course of their regular work duties, is consistently and chronically exposed to traumatic events (Black, Introduction to Trauma Exposed Professionals, Warrior Health Online Course – retrieved online at <https://education.warriorhealth.ca/courses/texp-en>, 2022). Although trauma exposure can spontaneously occur in a variety of workplace settings, the designation of Trauma Exposed Professional (TExp) is reserved for positions in which trauma exposure is a routinely anticipated requirement of the job.

In the course of being routinely exposed to traumatic events, these professionals may, or may not, experience trauma-based symptomology (traumatization) including flashbacks, irritability or aggression, alterations in cognition and mood, nightmares, physical reactivity after exposure to traumatic reminders, difficulty experiencing positive affect, hypervigilance,

difficulty sleeping, and feelings of isolation (PTSD, American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The presence of such symptomology can interfere with one's quality of life, impacting daily functioning, family dynamics, and relational connections. It is important to note that not all TExPs experience 'traumatization' as a result of their exposure; however, the probability of becoming traumatized increases when exposure is chronic and persistent, placing this demographic at a high risk of developing trauma symptomology in comparison to other non trauma-exposed professions.

Military, law enforcement, firefighting, corrections officers, social work professions, and medical professions are all fields in which members are routinely exposed to traumatic events and, thus, form the majority of professions categorized under the TExP umbrella. Historically, the traumatic impact of such careers has been studied from a segregated lens, seeking to better understand members' experiences from within the context of their specified profession. However, the consequences of trauma exposure (the resultant behaviours and relational dynamics) remain consistent across occupations, justifying the categorization of TExP. Rather than segregating the experiences of spouses within each separate profession, categorizing these professions together is done with the intention of understanding how TExP spouses navigate a sense of identity, living alongside their spouse's career-based trauma exposure/symptomology, and not necessarily focusing on the unique cultural elements found within each profession. Within the TExP's experiences resides a commonality of relational dynamics and challenges resultant from trauma exposures and symptomology, and although the trauma exposure may vary in detail between professions (e.g. exposure to gunfire, being the first on the scene at an accident, operating on traumatic injuries, handling cases of child abuse and neglect), the result of traumatization on the brain and body manifests similarly across professions in the form of

trauma-symptomology found within the DSM-5 diagnostic criteria of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD, APA, 2013). As such, the term TExp encompasses the diverse, yet shared, experiences of professionals that encounter routine exposure to trauma and categorizes these experiences in a way that allows for greater exploration into the commonality of experiences TExp spouses, without the need to account for the nuances of each profession's unique duties and circumstances.

Identity-Laden, Trauma Exposed Professions

Under the umbrella category of TExp's, there exists a subset of professions that embody a unique element of indoctrination within their career's subculture. Within the United States, military culture has been recognized as a distinct sub-culture with unique values and norms (Weiss & Coll, 2011). Both military and law enforcement training consists of the cultivation of a unified collective identity, routinely reinforcing each member's identity as an integral part of the whole (Grimell, 2015). Status is achieved through acceptance into the collective and adherence with the prescribed communal identity; the bonds that are forged within the collective are necessary for group survival and cohesion and are akin to that of familial connection and belonging (Soeters et al., 2006). Members are intentionally shaped to promote and maintain solidarity, as it is the strength of this unified mindset that sets the conditions for its members to behave as they need to during times of war and crisis (Weiss & Coll, 2011; Woody, 2005). Within-group solidarity requires unwavering allegiance to the unified cause, even unto death. The requirements of such an allegiance can catalyze a sense of estrangement from the 'outside' world including, at times, family, and friends (Woody, 2005). The strength of this indoctrination is further demonstrated by the challenges experienced with reintegration into civilian life post-service for members once part of military and military-like settings; reintegration is often likened

to ‘culture shock’ for ex-military personnel, as one’s sense of ‘identity’ is intricately woven into the collective (Coll et al., 2011; Wehrman, 2021).

A comprehensive literature review conducted by Elnitsky et al. (2017) showcased the challenges inherent in reintegration into civilian life post military-service, especially those who have been exposed to trauma and have sustained injuries (both mental and physical) as a result of service. Combat veterans reported feelings of alienation and isolation post-service. There can exist tension/disparity between their military identity and civilian identity, as most civilians (including family and friends) have no frame of reference for the culture and their experiences therein. Elnitsky et al. (2017) adapted Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model to explore the multifaceted environmental and community challenges inherent in the reintegration process, highlighting the cultural implications of membership within military and law enforcement professions, and the resultant implications this can have for the professional’s family/community.

As identity is inherently relational, impacted by the environment and culture within which one is situated, there exists the possibility that identity formation and individuation for spouses connected to these identity-laden professions may experience unique challenges in the face of ‘spouse of’ identification. The active service member within these professions is positioned as a valuable and integral piece of a collective whole, and the indoctrination process often extends to the spouse and family, with spouses experiencing the ‘label’ of being an extension of the member (Landers et al., 2020; Porter & Henrikson, 2016). Hence, TExP spouses may find navigating a sense of personal identity particularly challenging within such a cultural context and strong cultural indoctrination process.

Trauma Symptomology and Relationship Functioning

Given the relational embeddedness of identity, it is important to situate this area of inquiry within the existing literature regarding the impact of trauma symptomology on intimate relational functioning. To better understand the process – or potential necessity – of formulating an independent sense of identity within such a context, it is valuable to summarize the common experiences within these lived experiences. Additionally, common relational challenges experienced within intimate partnerships is valuable to note, to better identify and differentiate the impact of trauma symptomology on relationships, versus common challenges that occur in relationships without the presence of trauma.

Empirical studies have been conducted regarding the ways in which work, and family life are interconnected. Historically, this interface has primarily been examined unidirectionally, examining the impact of family dynamics and wellbeing on employee function (Hill et al., 2020). More recently, exploration into the effects of one's career on family wellbeing has been highlighted (Jonson et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2019). Current understandings posit that there exists a bidirectional interaction between the work-family interface; although theories may differ on the exact interaction effects (see Kossek and Lambert, 2005, for a comprehensive review of existing theory), there has been significant evidence to suggest that the health and wellbeing of one's intimate relationships can be influenced by employment experiences (Casas & Benuto, 2021). Considering the interconnection of work and family life, chronic trauma exposure within one's line of work/duty inevitably poses significant challenges within one's intimate relationships.

Although the current study is not pursuing the analysis of relational dynamics within trauma-impacted relationships, it is well-understood that trauma impacts and can threaten the

integrity of relationships (Monk et al., 2018; Monson et al., 2009; Nelson et al., 2007); holding a framework for the impact of trauma within relational functioning is imperative, given that identity is situated within relationship and intricately intertwined with the health and wellbeing of one's intimate connections.

Relational functioning within intimate partnerships covers a broad range of constructs that relate to the overall health and wellbeing of partnerships. From overarching concepts of relational satisfaction and distress to more acute behaviours and concerns, such as communication behaviours/styles, emotional safety, and mutual trust and respect, the wellbeing of a partnership has been well documented by scholar-practitioners such as Gottman (Gottman & Gottman, 2008; Goldberg, 2017), Johnson (Johnson, 2008), Greenberg (Mckinnon & Greenberg, 2017) and others. Numerous theories have been developed that seek to explain and address the relational challenges inherent in intimate partnerships; through careful observation and documentation, researchers have identified common relational challenges and effective ways in which to address these challenges to bolster the wellbeing of intimate relationships.

Understanding the 'common' relational environments within which trauma can situate itself is vital, when seeking to decipher the impact of trauma symptomology within spousal relationships. For example, numbing – a behavioural cluster resulting from PTSD symptomology – can resemble Gottman's 'emotional cut-off' (Goldberg, 2017), a form of negativity that can commonly be found within intimate relationships and that serves as a predictor of separation (Freedman et al., 2015; Gerlock et al., 2014). This emotional numbing – "diminished interest in significant activities, feelings of detachment or estrangement from others, and reduced affect" (Norris et al., 2018, p. 664) – has been associated with challenges in intimate relationships. Teasing apart the direct influence of trauma symptomology within an intimate relationship can

be challenging, as trauma symptoms can serve as both the cause of the dysfunction, as well as a factor that elevates pre-existing relational challenges (Freedman et al., 2015; Gerlock et al., 2014; Monson et al., 2009). Some studies suggest that the relationship between trauma symptomology and relational dissatisfaction is bidirectional, with trauma having detrimental effects on relationships and, inversely, poor relationships exacerbating the trauma symptomology (Freedman et al., 2015).

Johnson (2008) proposed that relational conflicts are grounded within one's attachment history, and the ability to seek connection in functional ways and reciprocate care and closeness. Inserting trauma into the equation of adult attachment/relationship security can facilitate a myriad of relational challenges and research exploring this intersection of trauma and relational dynamics/functioning has developed several models for understanding the impacts of trauma within intimate partnerships. Goff and Smith (2005) proposed the Couple Adaptation to Traumatic Stress Model (CATS), situated within a systems orientation and positing that trauma impacts the couple as a unit, as well as the individual members of the partnership simultaneously. This model proposes that trauma symptomology experienced within the partnership can facilitate greater conflict and violence, lower relationship cohesion, and create difficulties with intimacy; the needs of the individual become the primary focus, while the interpersonal functioning and the wellbeing of the secondary partner can be at risk (Goff & Smith, 2005). The CATS model emphasizes the circular causality of relational disruption/dysfunction when trauma is present.

The Dyadic Response to Trauma (DRT) model also examines the impact of trauma on romantic partnerships, framing both individuals as trauma victims, and positing that dyadic adjustment is complex considering such factors as Secondary Traumatic Stress (STS)

experienced by the spouse and caregiver burden (to be discussed at greater lengths in sections to follow) (Marshall & Kuijer, 2017; Taft et al., 2011).

Research has also explored the marital consequences of trauma exposure for TExPs, investigating the ways in which the *partnership* is impacted (and how this trickles out to impacting the active member's career) (Borum & Philpot, 1993; Roberts et al., 2013). Research into protective factors for couples, therapy tailored to TExPs and their spouses, as well as resilience-focused workshops for couples are described in the literature, yet there remains a gap in understanding how TEXP spouses navigate a sense of personal identity.

TExp Spousal Experiences

Numerous studies have investigated the mental health of military, law enforcement, paramedics, and firefighting spouses whose partners have acquired mental and physical injury from traumatic exposure (Beks, 2016; Calhoun et al., 2002; Regher et al., 2005; Skomorovsky et al., 2017; Yambo et al., 2016). Although the research regarding spouses has thus far been approached through the TEXP's job-specific, segregated lens, the experiences of spouses in relation to traumatic effects are consistent, creating a common thread of experience for spouses of TEXP's. There are several websites ((i.e. heelsandholster.com; hiddenheroes.org; projectsanctuary.com) and books (i.e. Kirschman, 2018; Matsakis, 2005), dedicated to the anecdotal experiences/challenges encapsulated within the experience of being a 'wife' of police-officers, firefighters, or military personnel, yet no formal investigation into the subjective, lived experiences of identity navigation within this spousal population has been undertaken. For the purposes of this research inquiry, 'spouse' refers to any individual who resides within a romantic, committed relationship and has been cohabitating with their significant other for twelve months or longer.

Family Systems Theory perspective – a theory of human behaviour that understands the family unit as a social system containing a diversity of moving parts, each impacting the other – views the family unit as a whole, rather than consisting of separate entities – the ‘spouse-of’ construct is complex and compounded by the variety of familial, societal, relational, and personal expectations embedded therein (Broderick, 1993). Family Systems Theory posits that when one member of the family (such as the TExp) is suffering, the rest of the family unit is inevitably impacted, as it shifts and adjusts to the changing relational landscape. The TExp spousal experience is therefore commonly understood and examined in the literature from within a Family Systems Theory lens (Adamsons et al., 2022; Marini et al., 2018; Paley et al., 2013) exploring the ways in which TExp’s families respond to, and experience, the repercussions of the trauma symptomology in these dynamic systems. From a systems approach, the literature makes a case for the benefit of approaching the TExp’s wellness from an integrated framework by addressing the complex familial dynamics that are a powerful force in the TExp’s existence (Monk et al., 2018; Monk et al., 2020). When the TExp spouse is excluded from the TExp’s treatment approach, research has found that this can result in interpersonal impairment (MacDermid et al., 2013; Monson et al., 2009) wherein the relational dynamic between spouses suffers, or results in ‘feedback loops’ in which the spouse will react to the TExp’s trauma symptomology in ways that are counterproductive to a healing trajectory for the TExp (Blount et al., 2014; Ford & Saltzman, 2009). There are several studies that explore the efficacy of approaching the treatment of traumatized TExPs through this systems lens; these studies each explore a variety of therapeutic frameworks to approaching the wellness of the relational dyad between the TExp and their spouse (Doss et al., 2012; Sautter et al., 2009; Stanley et al., 2010; Monson & Fredman, 2012). However, these studies are primarily focused on the wellbeing of the

TEXP or the relational/intimate wellness of the couple as a unit and do not address how the TEXP spouse navigates a sense of personal *identity* within the family system.

‘Spouse of’ Identity Construct

The history of trauma-exposed professions is predominantly male-dominated and is often structured from within a patriarchal approach to the institutional framework and the resultant spousal expectations therein. Although progress is being made towards a future that invites and encourages greater gender diversity within these fields, the current statistics continue to demonstrate that most service members are male (Statistics Canada, 2022; Statistica, 2021). Additionally, within the literature, the most prevalent narratives of being a ‘spouse of’ are experienced by cis-gender women in heterosexual relationships, often placed in positions that occupy gendered roles of ‘caretaker’ and family supporter (Barusch & Spaid, 1989; Revenson et al., 2015; Sharma et al., 2016; Ziff & Garland-Jackson, 2020).

Research into gender-socialization and gender roles discusses the ways in which socialized conceptualizations of gender and masculinity/femininity impact domestic spaces and the relational and emotional ‘norms’ that are often internalized, reinforced, and reconstructed in these spaces (Barker et al., 2010; Lindsey, 2021). Gender roles have historically been described as a ‘lynchpin’ of family functioning (Lorber, 1996), with parental norms and expectations often being framed from within traditional gendered expectations and division of labour, positioning females as occupying the role of primary parent and caregiver and males characterized by hegemonic masculinity, occupying a role of primary breadwinner with more rigid parenting styles (Andreasson & Johansson, 2016; Brody, 1993; Shapiro, 2014). The paradigm of a ‘good’ mother or wife often requires women to exemplify a self-sacrificing ethos in which their own needs and aspirations become of less importance, with the flavour of this paradigm often

pointing towards the assumption of a woman's moral 'duty' in Western contexts (Damaske, 2013; Gorman & Fritzsche). Naming the gendered lens within which the 'spouse-of' construct may reside is valuable in framing a sense of identity in context; it is also important to note that relationships and domestic experiences of couples who fall outside of the heterosexual model may encounter different elements that impact the experience of the 'spouse-of' construct, if at all. A more in-depth review of intersectional considerations is discussed in sections to follow.

The professional identity of the active member, within military and law enforcement professions, often extends to the member's family, as the family/spouse takes on the identity-by-association with the profession (Dobrovsky & Batterson, 1977; Landers et al., 2020; Porter & Henrikson, 2016; Voris, 2019). The 'spouse of' identity is often accompanied by an expectation to provide valued support and dedicated care for the active member, where the spouse is seen as an extension of the member and a critical element in the member's wellbeing (Beks, 2016; Campbell et al., 2022; Eubanks, 2013; Henry et al., 2011; Park, 2011; Stuttaford, 2020; Ziff & Garland-Jackson, 2020). Within military and law enforcement subcultures, the honour and collective value associated with the profession can become a central component of member identity, extending to the spouse, as intricately connected to the functioning of the member in service (Stuttaford, 2020). Spousal connection and identification with the active member are especially salient within military culture as the career requires the family to continually adjust to frequent relocations. Park (2011) eloquently relays a common phrase within military culture: "when one person joins, the whole family serves" (p. 65). This colloquial saying demonstrates the reality of potential identity fusion amongst spouses of military and law enforcement cultures, as the spouses experience identity-by-association and an expectation of commitment and solidarity with the members' profession. Cangia (2018) discussed the colloquial term of 'trailing

spouses' within military culture, delineating the orbital nature of the member's career and the ways in which spouses must adjust their own career, rhythms, and community in favour of the member's career (specifically in the form of frequent relocations). Some scholars comment on the unpaid labour extracted from military spouses – specifically military wives as they can occupy an “invisible unpaid status” (Spanner, 2022, p. 234) – and the gendered tropes that can underly this expectation of a devoted and self-sacrificing ‘spouse-of’ (Basham et al., 2020; Cohler et al., 2017; Hedström, 2020; Hyde, 2016).

Bereaved spouses of military members reported that, when the member has passed, there can exist an ‘identity vacuum’, as they no longer occupy the role of ‘spouse of’ (Wehrman, 2021). As role occupation has been found to influence one's conceptualization of identity (Stets & Surpe, 2013), extricating one's identity from that of ‘spouse of ____’ (insert military, police, first responder, etc.) can be especially challenging. The ‘spouse of’ identity can be further exacerbated by the effects of trauma exposure, as the TExP spouse contends not only with the career-laden identity, but also with the consuming challenges of caring for their partner with trauma-related behaviours. A brief Google search of “police spouses and support” or “military spouses and support” reveals that support for partners of professions such as military and law-enforcement is recognized as a necessary component of wellbeing; however, as mentioned above, when examined closely, spousal support is often mentioned in connection to being the best, healthiest support system *for the active member*, not because of the importance of spousal wellbeing in its own right. Spousal health and wellbeing are somewhat considered, yet too often it is within the context of assisting the spouse in providing support for the trauma exposed professional.

It is worth noting that an experience of pride for spouses of TExPs has also been documented within the literature. Spouses report a sense of community and purpose found within their connection to the TExP's career (Casas & Benuto, 2021; Porter & Henriksen, 2016) and, when well-supported by the community, living alongside the challenges of supporting their trauma-exposed spouse can be understood as both a sense of duty and a role that spouses undertake as an extension of their 'spousal' duties for the cost of the partner's meaningful sacrifice (Porter & Henriksen, 2016). Although many 'family/spousal' resources seem to be created with the intent of addressing spousal wellbeing to bolster support for the active professional, there are also reports of spouses forming supportive networks in which they take pride in their 'spouse of' identity and seek to inspire and encourage one another in their pursuit of dreams and individuated identity (for example: armywifetwork.com).

Despite considerable amounts of research dedicated to the spousal experience of being connected to a TExP, a review of the literature revealed only a few studies that directly addressed identity navigation within this population. Murphy et al. (2017) relayed participants' experiences of loss of congruence with identity in their context of being a military veteran spouse, actively suppressing their true selves as they adapted to the trauma behaviours in the home. Rossetto (2009) conducted a qualitative study that explored the stress experience and resilience process for military spouses while the active member was deployed and their study found that while the partner was away, self-enhancement opportunities (finding activities that were self-focused) promoted their internalized understanding of their identities. Participants in Rossetto's study also expressed the challenge of the spouses' identities being fused within the employment status of the military member and having to work hard to differentiate their own identities from that of their spouses. Rossetto also found that during deployment, spouses were

faced with the restriction of time, as they were confronted with increased responsibilities and the associated lack of energy, resulting in a restricted amount of self-focus energy available to them.

Ben Arzi et al. (2000) investigated the impact of separation-individuation – defined within the broader literature as the developmental establishment of a distinct sense of self (Mahler et al. 1963) – by spouses living alongside a partner with PTSD, and they determined that higher levels of separation-individuation “enabled [spouses] to manoeuvre between intimacy and autonomy in the family system” (Ben Arzi et al., 2000, p. 734). The Ben Arzi et al. study found that wives who could more securely establish distinct selves (higher levels of separation-individuation) were less susceptible to the development of secondary traumatic stress. This is valuable information when applied to TExp spouses and, yet, the mechanisms involved in how these spouses navigated their individuated selves was not explored, showcasing the potential for the current study to help address this gap.

For military wives in particular, the literature speaks to the challenge of maintaining an ‘individuated’ role from that of spouse-of, regarding employment (Castaneda & Harrell, 2008; Harrell et al., 2005). The constant postings experienced by military families can create great difficulty in attaining employment outside of the home or engaging in higher education (Lewis, 2020), thus contributing to what some literature has coined the ‘trailing spouse’ (Cangià, 2018). Research investigating employment experiences amongst military spouses (primarily ‘wives’) has showcased the challenges of predictability, consistency and time affordance – due to high expectations placed on military wives – in relation to employment (Meadows et al., 2016; Ott et al., 2016). The correlation between wellbeing and employment amongst military wives has undergone some investigation, with findings suggesting that military wives’ general wellbeing was positively correlated to ‘role satisfaction’ in an exterior place of employment or in their role

as homemaker (Rosen et al., 1990). Brown (2008) demonstrated that military spouses' career interruptions, due to the constant state of flux, could lead to loss of power, identity, and self-worth for this population. However, the ways in which the spouses experienced and navigated this loss of power and identity was not explicated.

The irony and challenge involved within the current study focused on identity navigation of the TExP is worth naming; although this research seeks to understand the experiences of identity differentiation – an identity independent of that of 'spouse of' within this population – the literature review has itself perpetuated the spouse-of identity construct by explicitly referencing the participants in the same manner. Hence, there is a challenge inherent in identifying the population of interest, while simultaneously honouring the multiplicity of identities for these spouses.

Coping Strategies

Literature that has explored the lived experiences of TExP spouses frequently speaks to the ways in which spouses cope with the challenges inherent in their 'spouse of' roles. An entire literature review could be dedicated to the studies that explore such coping strategies, and although that is not the focus of this study, understanding the experiences of spouses in coping within their contexts is a vital piece of the puzzle in further understanding how these coping strategies may impact identity navigation.

Sharp (2022) identified several studies that endorse the necessity of formal (organizational) and informal (peer) support in managing the day-to-day pressures of being a TExP spouse (Brady et al., 2019; Brodie & Eppler, 2012; Karaffa et al., 2015; Roth & Moore, 2009; Shakespear-Finch et al., 2002). In these studies, participants reported feelings of loneliness and isolation in their experiences of being a 'spouse of' a TExP, as well as the positive ways in

which interaction with other spouses who understood PTSD and its effects. Other studies reported the pride and honour that spouses felt in connection to the TExp's career, and the ways in which the role of 'spouse' (and the TExp's PTSD) had impacted their sense of maturation and adaptability, citing their experience as encouraging a post-traumatic growth trajectory (Karaffa et al., 2015; Porter & Henrikson, 2015; Wheeler & Erasmus, 2017). Withdrawing, compensating emotionally (e.g., 'walking on eggshells'), and taking on additional parenting/caregiving duties were also endorsed as coping strategies employed by spouses amidst the strain of living alongside a TExp; the ways in which these strategies manifest is further explicated in the sections to follow.

Studies have been conducted that explored interventions geared toward spouses experiencing the effects of living alongside a TExp, approaching the support of spouses through programming that facilitated the learning of emotional acceptance and mindfulness, cognitive behavioural strategies of thought navigation and managing stress (Kees & Rosenblum, 2015), encouraging physical movement/exercise, daily journaling, seeking support from peers (Blank et al., 2012; Friese, 2020), and keeping busy (Lapp et al., 2010). These studies provide valuable insight into the ways in which spouses of TExPs approach wellbeing within the challenging reality in which they reside, challenges that include the experience of psychological distress.

Psychological Distress

Commonly reported experiences of TExp spouses include marital stress and dysfunction, responsibility for maintenance of family equilibrium, responsibility to protect children from spouse's trauma-based behaviours (McGaw et al., 2020; Yambo et al., 2016), to protect the TExp from their own mental state and behavioural tendencies (Waddell et al., 2107), mental and physical exhaustion, as well as secondary trauma stress (Ahmadi et al., 2011; Landers et al.,

2020). In 2022, Sharp et al. conducted a systematic review that investigated the mental health and wellbeing outcomes experienced by first responder families and spouses, who reported feeling the burden of fulfilling the role of emotional support system, often maintaining this role at the expense of their own wellbeing. Sharp and colleagues (2022) identified this as “compensatory emotional regulation” (p. 9), speaking to this phenomenon of the spouses subduing their emotional needs to avoid conflict, as well as neutralize high stress situations with their TExP spouses; they reported withdrawing and numbing their own behavioural responses in the home and relationship in order to relieve the stress of the family (Campbell et al., 2022; Davidson et al., 2006; Roberts & Levenson, 2001; Landers et al., 2020; Thompson et al., 2005; Karaffa et al., 2015; Bochantin, 2016; Porter & Henrikson, 2016; Waddell, 2020). Protective buffering has also been discussed in the literature and encompasses similar behaviours that attempt to shield one’s spouse from distressing realities, hiding one’s concerns, or concealing worries to protect (Joseph & Afifi, 2010).

‘Walking on eggshells’ is a common phrase found in the literature concerning the military spousal experience and is often used to relay the behavioural adjustments military spouses make in response to living alongside a spouse suffering with PTSD. The walking on eggshells metaphor is representative of the all-consuming nature of the PTSD behaviours and its impact on those around the afflicted member (Beks, 2016; Doncaster et al., 2019; Temple et al., 2017). Beks (2016) defines ‘walking on eggshells’ as a, “persistent state of tension, fear, restraint, and vigilance” (p. 651), in which TExP spouses exercise great caution in their own emotional expression and communication style, in order to appease the TExP, very similar in definition to Sharp’s (2022) compensatory emotional regulation, a definitional understanding shared by Yambo et al. 2016.

Doncaster et al. (2019) denote a similar definition of subduing emotional and behavioural responses as well as a hypervigilance and hyperattunement to the mood and behaviours of the TExp. Interestingly, although the Temple et al. (2017) article's title includes the phrase "We walk on eggshells", they do not provide a clear explanation of what 'walking on eggshells' involves, nor do they present a participant that directly vocalized such an experience in their results. Temple and colleagues (2017) do speak to the challenges shared by participants regarding the unpredictability of the TExp's behaviour and not knowing what might negatively impact the TExp. Yambo et al. (2016) distinguished a slightly different TExp spousal experience of "being the peacemaker" (p. 547) which denotes similar behaviours of conflict avoidance but with an added element of educating their children on the trauma behaviours of their father (the TExp) and modeling ways to interact with the TExp in ways that maintained equilibrium.

When the illness experienced by the TExp demands such focused attention and care for the survival of the member and their partnership, there exists limited opportunity for partners to experience a differentiated identity apart from caregiver and 'spouse of' the member with PTSD (Taber, 2009). An encompassing feeling of isolation and aloneness has been reported in the literature, highlighting the challenges of maintaining connection with others amidst the realities of a household impacted by the trauma symptomology of a TExp (McGaw et al., 2020).

Secondary traumatic stress (STS), resulting from indirect exposure to trauma through engaging and empathizing with traumatized persons, has also been discovered to be a prevalent experience amongst spouses/partners of TExPs (Ahmadi et al., 2011; Landers et al., 2020; Meffert et al., 2014; Roberts & Levinson, 2001; Wheater & Erasmus, 2017). STS can manifest in the forms of nausea, intrusive thoughts, anxiety, confusion, mood changes, avoidance, fear, and worry (Casas & Benuto, 2021) and studies have demonstrated the positive correlation between

severity of TExP PTSD and spousal STS, with reports suggesting high prevalence rates of STS (Ahmadi, 2011; Bjornestad, 2014; Norris et al., 2018). STS has also been highly correlated with depression, reduced self-care, hostility, withdrawal, and sexual dysfunction (Norris et al., 2018). There is debate in the research concerning the validation of determining the presence of STS amongst TExP spouses directly caused by their partner's trauma; interpretation of self-report questionnaires that measure the presence of STS have limitations in that questions that pertain to trauma symptomology are intentionally worded so as not to reference a specific event, creating the possibility that spouses' high scores within these measurements may be due to their own trauma histories rather than directly related to their relationships and cohabitation with a TExP (Renshaw et al., 2011). Although discerning the exact causation of such distress can be questionable, most research has found elevated levels of distress amongst spouses of TExPs, warranting further investigation into more robust support strategies and interventions for this population.

The reality of the mental health consequences of being intimately connected to a TExP has been well documented, and showcases the challenges associated with such a role; however, investigation into the ways in which these experiences impacts TExP spousal identity navigation and construction is lacking in the literature and speaks to the knowledge gap that this research sought to fill.

Caregiver/Role Burden

The term 'caregiver burden' was created within the literature as a means of describing the responsibility – and accompanying depletion – experienced by individuals caring for family members diagnosed with dementia and chronic illnesses (Klaric et al., 2010). Within the broader literature related to caregiver burden, studies have shown that as the needs of the injured family

member increase, the responsibilities of caregiving can be taken on by the spouse as an identity engulfment in which they experience a loss of other facets of identity (Dickson et al., 2010; Eifert et al., 2015), alternatively labelled by Cooper (2021) as “identity disruption”, whereby the all-consuming responsibilities of caregiving lead to a loss of identity for spouses as they orbit the needs and wellbeing of the injured/ill family member. While encouraging to see the explicit reference to identity in these studies, the literature remains unclear as to how the caregivers navigate this identity disruption or engulfment.

In more recent history, the term has extended to include the experiences of family members caring for their loved ones who are experiencing a broader range of mental health challenges; caregiver burden has thus been identified within the literature as a prevalent experience amongst spouses navigating life alongside their partner suffering from PTSD (Calhoun et al., 2002; Skomorovsky et al., 2017).

PTSD disrupts the social, professional, and relational capacities of those afflicted, often leaving the family/partner to deal with the stressors of relational crises, role disruption, financial adjustments, and isolation (Klaric et al., 2010; McGaw et al., 2020). To support their partners with PTSD/trauma symptomology, spouses frequently take on additional responsibility within the household/relationship, including greater flexibility (in order to cater to the needs and schedule of the TExPs), providing emotional support during times of hyperarousal, increased parenting responsibilities, and household needs (Casas & Benuto, 2021; Mailey et al., 2018). Some research refers to the shifting roles/responsibilities as ‘ambiguous loss’ (Kent, 2013; Kirschman, 2018), with spouses having to renegotiate their roles and connection with the TExP, mourning the rhythms, roles, and attachment they once had with their spouse, which all would appear to be related to a sense of identity, but which was not explicitly named. Managing

increased home responsibilities and shifting relational capacities, spouses (primarily women in the literature) reported feeling isolated and misunderstood by the greater community/general public (Voris, 2019).

In Western culture, the burden of ‘caregiving’ is often a gendered expectation and placed upon the female partner to provide the care and support required by the individual experiencing trauma symptoms, catalyzing an all-encompassing focus of energy on the wellbeing of the spouse. Some women reported their sense of moral obligation and commitment to caring for their partners while citing their diminished capacity to maintain personal space and boundaries (Norris et al., 2018). In addition to occupying the role of ‘caregiver’, the role of ‘parent’ is discussed frequently within the literature as a salient consideration within managing the challenges of caregiver burden, as a spouse of a TExp (McGaw et al., 2020).

Increased responsibility for the care and wellbeing of children is a central theme in many studies that address the parenting aspect of living alongside a spouse suffering with trauma symptomology. Managing the unpredictability of the trauma symptomology can facilitate concern for partners in ensuring that children are safe from any reactivity on the part of the TExp. There is some evidence that suggests that children’s emotional and behavioural wellbeing may be negatively affected by parental PTSD/trauma exposure and that a protective factor against such impact is the parental engagement and wellbeing of the remaining spouse (Comer et al., 2014; Duarte et al., 2006; Uchida et al., 2018). Spouses have described their partners as ‘ticking time bombs’ (McGaw et al., 2020, p. 460), unpredictably triggered and emotionally volatile; parental concern for the intergenerational impact of the TExp’s behaviours is a concern amongst spouses and can be taken on as an additional burden of protection (Malec et al., 2017).

The roles that one embodies, and the relational connections embedded within those roles, can serve as a foundational component of one's perception of identity. The gendered expectations that often accompany 'motherhood', as well as the physical and emotional changes that accompany motherhood, catalyze a re-evaluation of one's autonomy and identity for many women (Laney et al., 2015). Navigating the responsibilities of parenting and the gendered expectations that accompany motherhood, while simultaneously managing life alongside a TExP, presents unique challenges to identity and is important to acknowledge when examining the importance/prevalence of identity differentiation and construction within the current research.

Eifert et al. (2015) highlighted the challenges in navigating the shifting experiences of a shared, dyadic identity ("us") – encapsulated within previously established rhythms and patterns in relationships – and the ways in which this shared dyadic identity often dissolves dramatically, as one takes on the role that resembles that of 'caregiver' (Eifert et al., 2015). Sentiments of the partner "coming home a different [person]" are relayed within the research conducted by McGaw et al. (2020), highlighting the potential loss and isolation encapsulated within the changing relational dynamic. Hayes et al. (2009) explained the construction of identity as occurring within reciprocal intimacy, communicating thoughts and needs within the safety of intimate relationships, situating the construction of identity within intimate partner relationships to be of vital importance. Disrupting the availability of a reciprocal, intimate relationship with one's spouse can catalyze the creation of a vacuum in which identity as 'caregiver' can become dominant (Hayes et al., 2009). Female partners of PTSD-diagnosed veterans reported the debilitating consequences of having to assume the roles of caregiver, protector, provider, and advocate (Beks, 2016) and, once again, taking on these roles may or may not have translated into changes in identity for the spouses, which is the focus of the current study, given that roles may

be assigned, but not identified with by an individual (e.g., I am in the role of caregiver, but I don't want to be that to my spouse).

Researchers have become increasingly interested in the lived experiences of TExP spouses/intimate partner relationships, yet have approached such inquiry primarily through the lens of the connection the spouse has to the members' careers and trauma exposures, seeking to uncover ways to bolster member resiliency through relational and spousal support/security (Calhoun et al., 2002; Landers et al., 2020; Karaffa et al., 2015; McGaw, 2020; Regher et al., 2005). As such, further inquiry into the wellbeing of TExP spouses has been approached by way of seeking to understand their lived experiences in relation to the consequences of their partner's career/trauma exposure (Borah & Fina, 2017; McGaw, 2020). Although exploring STS and caregiver burden is an essential component in understanding how to support the family/marital unit as a whole – as well as determine ways in which to better support the wellbeing of the spouse – there exists minimal literature examining how TExP spouses navigate a sense of personal identity, apart from the trauma exposed professional.

As studies have demonstrated, the protective factors that family/spousal support provides for the TExP can be instrumental for the TExP's health (Regehr, 2005; Stuttaford, 2020), therefore, focus has often been given to the spouse's role of 'supporter', with little attention on the aspects of the spouse's identity that is differentiated from that of 'spouse of'. One article by Ziff and Garland-Jackson (2020) speaks to the identity challenges encapsulated in being a military wife, specifically in relation to the stereotypes that are pervasive within the subculture. They found that establishing one's own agency and sense of identity to be a challenging endeavour when facing the expectation (both from the institution, as well as within the partnership) of conformity to military identity and lifestyle. Other literature specifically explores

the career-related aspects of spousal identity and the impact of maintaining a career while intimately attached to a military professional (Kapel et al., 2020). Kapel and colleagues (2020) found that lower degrees of differentiation amongst spouses of ex-prisoners of war (EPOW) predicted increased vulnerability to secondary trauma experiences and compassion fatigue. Hence, the need for a balanced approach between fusion and differentiation was found to be a protective factor towards a more stable sense of identity, and overall spousal wellbeing.

Intimate Partner Violence

Intimate partner violence (IPV) and domestic violence (DV) are prevalent issues within partnerships facing the realities of trauma exposure (Gerlock et al., 2014; Meffert et al., 2014; Williston, 2015). PTSD symptomology has been correlated with increased prevalence of IPV (Marshall et al., 2005; Misca & Forgey, 2017; Taft et al., 2013; Teten et al., 2009; Wolf et al., 2013), with studies suggesting that the increased risk of IPV among TExPs could be associated with “alteration in arousal and reactivity” (Tharp et al., 2016, p. 1098), irritability, and aggressive behaviour symptomology found within PTSD. Psychological wellbeing and identity can be severely impacted amongst survivors of IPV and DV, influencing one’s sense of worth and diminishing one’s own identity focus, posing challenges in relation to identity differentiation and concepts of identity navigation that this study seeks to address. Because of the traumatic nature of IPV and DV, spouses of TExPs who have lived – or are currently living – through the realities of IPV/DV, although important, have been excluded from the current study.

Intersectionality

Inquiry into experiences of identity must acknowledge the intersectional influences inherent in identity construction. In Crenshaw’s (1989) pioneering work on intersectionality, she calls attention to complex components of identity that influence one’s positionality in social and

political structures and the ways in which these various components of identity intersect to influence how one experiences the world and how one identifies in that world. When exploring identity differentiation and construction amongst spouses of TExP, diverse factors such as culture, gender, and roles (e.g., “parent”) must be accounted for regarding their influence on how TExP spouses navigate a sense of personal identity.

Culture.

Culture is a broadly utilized term that can contain a myriad of definitions and conceptualizations, referring, for example, to a defined but complex set of unifying beliefs, behaviours and values, or alternatively referring more broadly to geographic locations and concepts of ‘race’ (Van Rooyen & Nqweni, 2012). Shared heritage does not necessarily connote a shared belief system or framework for the world, nor does skin colour or religious affiliation; however, holding awareness for the existence of the multiplicity of ‘identity/identities’ and the intersectional factors that impact one’s ‘cultural’ lived experiences is a vital element in seeking to engage in discussions of identity such as this the current study aims to do.

A study by Jobson (2011) examined the differences in degrees of autonomous orientation (one’s expression of self-determination and agency) in autobiographical remembering (highly implicated in understanding trauma symptomology) between collectivist-oriented cultures and individualist-oriented cultures. Their study concluded that the level of interdependence within the trauma memory decreases within *both* collectivist-oriented and individualist-oriented participants with PTSD, catalyzing an increased sense of alienation. The researchers were surprised that a greater difference was not found between these two orientations, suggesting the possibility of a shared biological component of trauma-memory that impacts one’s social engagement, warranting further investigation, but that is beyond the scope of the current study.

Literature that speaks to cultural considerations within trauma recovery and treatment suggest that trauma symptomology may manifest in diverse ways in accordance with cultural norms and expectations (how one makes sense/meaning of an experience, how one expresses distress) (McClendon et al., 2020; Wilson, 2007). Although the neurobiological response to trauma may be universal (Friedman, 2000; Schore, 2003) the ways in which this internal biological response is expressed may vary cross-culturally in accordance with cultural beliefs and norms regarding symptomatic expression and mediation (Van Rooyen & Nqweni, 2012).

The current study did not seek to decipher and define the complex and varying constructions of how ‘culture’ defines and mediates trauma and trauma symptomology but recognizes the vast potential of influencing factors on identity and relationships. As such, the ways in which a spouse engages with trauma symptomology in their relationship may be impacted by cultural mores and, when examining spousal identity in connection to TExP trauma symptomology, it is vital to note that cultural affiliation can shape one’s identity and the ways in which one conceptualizes the importance of an ‘independent’ sense of self (Chirkov & Sheldon, 2011; Smith, 2011; Willis, 2012).

Sexuality and Gender Identity.

Engaging in research that speaks to identity differentiation, as this study does, must acknowledge the intersectionality encapsulated within experiences of sexuality and gender identity. One’s process of formulating an identity can be intricately impacted by their relationship with their sexuality and gender identity and the ways in which systems and cultures acknowledge these intersectionalities.

Identity experiences in the LGBTQ2S+ community have become of increasing interest within the literature in general and are gaining traction within articles pertaining to military

service and law enforcement (Aldahondo & Cole, 2023; Belanger & Pedlar, 2020; Milano, 2019). Examining the impact of trauma exposure on identity within one's intimate partnership carries with it increased intersectional considerations within the context of marginalized identities and relationships. Careers within the military and law enforcement professions have historically (and in many ways continuing to this day) enforced conformity to a narrow definition of sexuality and gender 'norms' and expectations, rooted in binary assumptions of masculinity (Whitt, 2022). Until recently, LGBTQ+ identities were criminalized within both civilian and military contexts, and although that has since changed, informal acts of aggression and prejudice continue to infect many areas within such professions (Whitt, 2022). A separate literature review dedicated to this topic would be required to do justice to the intersectional experiences of LGBTQ identifying service members and their partners and is beyond the scope of this study (see Gribble et al., 2020 for a scoping review of the intersectional definitions of a 'military family' within the mental health field). However, briefly reviewing the literature in this area seemed pertinent to acknowledge the potential intersectional experiences encapsulated within the context of TExP spouses navigating a sense of individual identity.

Summary

As indicated by the existing research discussed within this chapter, how TExP spouses navigate a sense of personal identity is largely unreported and/or underrepresented. Forming a basis of understanding for the lived experiences of identity navigation within this population will amplify voices that have otherwise been overlooked by many trauma exposed professions that, in their attempt to care for and honour the trauma exposed service member, fail to explore the identities of service member spouses in their own rights.

Implications of the Literature review

The literature reveals that spousal experiences of caregiver burden and secondary traumatic stress are prevalent within their connection to various trauma exposed professions, yet this research is often framed within the overarching goal of ensuring spousal wellbeing, with the aim of providing care and security for the active service member. To best understand the perspectives and experiences of TExP spouses, exploring the mechanisms through which spouses navigate identity apart from their connection to the service member may provide valuable insight into how to better support those living out these realities.

Chapter 3 Methodology

A qualitative methodology encased within the social constructionist paradigm, guided by Wilber's (2000) three strands of knowing, forms the basis of this inquiry. Data was generated through engagement with narrative-styled interviews with participants identified through purposive and snowball sampling approaches. The following chapter will outline the theory and rationale underlying the selection and use of a qualitative, thematic analysis approach.

Procedures regarding recruitment, data collection, data analysis, study evaluation, and ethical considerations will also be detailed.

Empiricism: Narrow and Broad

This study sought to explore the experiences of TExP spouses, investigating the lived realities of identity formation and individuation amidst the challenges encapsulated within such relational connections. Although unpacking lived experiences through dialogic engagement is common within the natural rhythms of relational and communal living, the current study employed a systematic approach to collecting and analyzing the data, validating the research process as broad-based, empirical scientific inquiry. I will first delineate how my study rests within the greater realm of empirical science, detailing the ways in which the broadly accepted 'scientific method' presents itself within qualitative methodology.

The term 'empiricism' is most popularly understood as the apprehension of 'objective' data located in the physical world and accessible through sensory experiences (sight, sound, touch, taste, smell) – referred to as the exterior/objective domain – of observable and quantifiable phenomenon (for example the weight of a crocodile, the speed of a motorcycle, the height of a desk). This exterior domain is often given greater weight and validity in the realm of science, privileged above the subjective/interior domain – the internal, intangible/invisible experiences of

thoughts, emotions, perceptions – with which much qualitative research engages. Although the exterior/objective domain gathers knowledge through more quantifiable methods (the “eyes of the flesh” (Black, 2008), this data is nonetheless interpreted and then represented symbolically by way of numbers or words, in the same way that interior experiences are conveyed symbolically through words and artful representations. Traditionally, there has existed a tension between qualitative and quantitative approaches to knowledge generation, which Wilber (2000) asserts is fundamentally based on a narrow definition of empiricism.

Wilber (2000) distinguishes between narrow and broad empiricism, providing a description of each that explains the legitimacy of both qualitative and quantitative in their respective domains. Narrow empiricism refers to the apprehension of data through one’s physical senses (the eye of the flesh), making it observable, measurable, and popularly accepted as ‘hard’ science. Broad empiricism validates both the interior and exterior domains as available to scientific inquiry. Knowledge gained and shared regarding internal emotional and spiritual experiences are understood within broad empiricism, as valid descriptions of internal sensory experiences; although we cannot quantifiably ‘see’ one’s experiences of falling in love, that does not make their romantic journey any less ‘real’. Black (2008) illustrated this in stating:

Individual subjective interiors are invisible to the physical senses, and as such, are invisible to the hard sciences. To illustrate this invisibility, consider the experience of sadness as an example. The experience of sadness does not have simple location in the world. One may observe tears, a downward turned mouth, and sobbing. One may measure the chemicals released in a tear, the angle at which the mouth turns down, and the increase in blood pressure with each heave and sob, but none of these can tell the observer about the individual’s interior experience of sadness. Interior subjective experiences (e.g., thoughts,

emotions, beliefs, values) are not visible to the physical sciences, but that does not mean they are not real. (p.3).

Attempting to ‘study’ one’s subjective, lived experience of sadness through quantitative methodologies (scales, questionnaires, numbered responses) would not adequately apprehend the data in a way that was as representative of the lived experience as it could be through qualitative methodologies. In this way, the methodology selected for a particular study should be compatible with the domain from which the data is derived. Utilizing the scientific method to investigate the properties of a fossil is appropriate, just as qualitative inquiry (utilizing conversation and symbolic representation) is appropriate for apprehending data of internal, subjective, and nuanced experiences. As this study explored how TExP spouses navigate a sense of personal identity, qualitative methodology is most appropriate, as the data in question is located within the participants’ internal landscapes, their meaning-making processes, and their personal histories – accessible only through a process of symbolic representation.

Three Strands of Valid Knowing

Within the understanding of broad empiricism, fundamental to all science, Wilber (2000) delineated what he coined the three strands of all valid knowing: 1) instrumental injunction (an appropriate method applied for accessing the data required within the research question), 2) direct apprehension, and 3) communal confirmation/rejection. Research that follows these basic tenets adequately delineates sound methodological procedures and scientific rigour. Black (2008) asserts that this approach effectively resolves the tensions between qualitative and quantitative approaches within the social sciences, provided the ‘fit’ between the method of apprehending the data (injunction) is aligned with/the most appropriate form of accessing the data itself. This

argument broadens the bandwidth of what is considered scientific inquiry and allows for a more inclusive definition of epistemology and methodology.

Qualitative Positioning

As noted above, the most appropriate method for exploring my research questions regarding identity navigation experiences, amongst TExP spouses, is a qualitative methodology. Adhering to the first strand of valid knowing, I dialogued directly with those who have experience within this phenomenon, exploring and co-constructing the nuanced narratives of identity navigation for spouses of TExPs. Qualitative research is concerned with accessing the subjective interpretations of participants' experiences and the ways in which they attribute meaning to those experiences; as such, the epistemological basis within qualitative research asserts that knowledge of others' experiences is attained through engaging in meaningful dialogue (accessed through language or symbolism) and co-constructing a mutual understanding between 'knower' (participant) and 'would-be-knower' (researcher). As the name suggests, qualitative inquiry is more interested in exploring and emphasizing the quality and nature of an experience over 'measurable' and 'quantifiable' data. Although both qualitative and quantitative methodology could likely garner a re-presentation of participants' experiences of identity navigation within this context, qualitative methodology is most suitable in this area of inquiry, as it provides participants the opportunity to symbolize and relay their internal lived experiences through thick descriptions, not limited by predetermined numerical check boxes or 'scaled' questionnaires that are often predominant within quantitative methodologies.

Although there exist various ways from which to approach qualitative inquiry, there are foundational elements that remain consistent across the various qualitative methodologies. Merriam (2009) speaks to four such qualities, with the first being that qualitative research is

interested in the experiences and understandings regarding the phenomenon in question through the lens of the participants, not the researcher. Second, in qualitative research the researcher is understood as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; this identifies that the researcher, as a human being, engages with the study by expanding their knowledge through interaction with the participants. This raises the inevitability of the researcher applying their own bias and assumptions to the process, and is, therefore, viewed as active and engaged with the data collection and analysis. To reduce the degree of researcher ‘subjectivities’, the researcher needs to approach the process with transparency, identifying their areas of bias and applying methods to reduce the impact of such biases; my own positionality as a researcher as it relates to this study was named in Chapter 2 of this thesis and is further explicated in how it translated into the analysis process in later sections. The third characteristic speaks to qualitative research requiring field work, engaging with the phenomena in its ‘natural’ context. In the case of this research inquiry, I asked participants where they were most comfortable meeting for our interviews, in order to facilitate the ‘safest’ engagement possible, with all participants choosing to engage in virtual interviews, wherein they could choose the spaces in which they felt most comfortable, while still adhering to privacy. Lastly, qualitative inquiry is largely inductive and generative, exploring phenomenon to generate theory rather than test existing theory (Merriam, 1998).

It is important to voice that there exists a false perception within much qualitative inquiry that the data gathered through the engagement with participants’ experiences yields results that provide concrete ‘knowing’ of these lived experiences. Whether expressed verbally or otherwise, the expression of one’s story is, in actuality, a new co-creation, a memory of an event that the narrator expresses and co-constructs through dialogue with the researcher, rather than a

photographic documentation of the facts. In this sense, qualitative inquiry does not gather concrete ‘knowing’ of the actuality of an event, nor ‘discover’ what certain events were like, but rather engages in the unique co-construction of a memory and/or experience within the encounter between the researcher and participant. The researcher (myself) cannot truly ‘know’ how it was to live the participants’ experiences of navigating a sense of personal identity but the researcher can gain insight from the constructed mutual understanding of the participants’ retelling and interpretations of their experiences in the shared space-between the knowers and would-be-knower. As such, I did not gather the ‘essence’ of participants’ experiences, but rather constructed the thematic essence of our co-constructed understanding of the sharing of elements of the experience that the participants were willing to disclose to me in that moment in time. Both knowers and would-be-knower approach the research reciprocally and dialogically, mutually impacting and being impacted by the research process.

My engagement with participants’ lived experiences was approached from the lens of social constructionism, opposing the positivist notion that the researcher can remain an objective observer, extracting the knowable ‘truth’ of a given phenomenon. Rather, social constructionism honours the collaborative and dialogic nature of knowledge creation and recognizes the contextual basis of lived experiences and co-constructed nature of the data.

Social Constructionism

Approaching research from the understanding of knowledge being co-constructed through a dialogic encounter, the major theoretical framework that underlies this research is the social constructionist paradigm, positioning the attainment of knowledge as a social and relational endeavor, generated through the meaning assigned to the interactional exchange between people. As participants share their lived experiences, knowledge is generated within the

dialogue between the researcher and the participant. Opposing an objectivist ideal that there is a singular, knowable 'truth' to be discovered about a particular phenomenon, social constructionism posits that experiences, and one's sharing and understanding of these experiences, are socially constructed and co-constructed. The ontological question of "what is the form and nature of reality and, therefore, what can be known about it?" (Lincoln & Guba, 1994, p. 108) is approached within social constructionism as understanding one's 'reality', their unique inner emotional and psychological experiences of the world, as multiplicitous; the 'truth' of one's inner landscape can only be approached through dialogic encounters between people and, even then, is a co-constructed understanding of a physically intangible experience, more akin to truthfulness than empirical, unitary 'truth'. The meaning attributed to any given experience and one's understanding of a lived experience, are mediated by interpretation, as all aspects of the social world are ascribed meaning within a dialogic encounter with 'others'. As such, the encounter between researcher and participant constructs a unique, mutually agreed-upon understanding of the experience/event rather than collecting a subjective or observing a quantifiable 'truth' of the experience itself (Bogden & Biklen, 2007).

This paradigm answers the epistemological questions of "what is the relationship between the knower or would-be-knower and what could be known?" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p. 108) by positioning the researcher to be active and interactive within the research, understanding the reciprocal dialogue between 'researcher' and 'participant' to be the basis for rich data, co-created through a mutual understanding. Rather than attempt to translate the relayed experiences into quantifiable and 'measurable' separate components, the stories/experiences/events are honoured as a whole, holding the subjective interpretation within the participants' stories, as the truth of their unique experience at that moment in time. Rather than occupying the assumed role

of an ‘objective’ observer of the system, the researcher is understood to be a functioning element within the system, unable to predict the exact ways in which the data will unfold, an active agent within the knowledge generating and gathering process (Reichelt & Sierve, 2013).

Research Positionality

The qualitative research paradigm holds that arriving at the ‘data’ involves a co-construction and relational dialogue between the researcher and participant. Therefore, it is vital to acknowledge the linkage between the researcher’s own positionality within the topic of inquiry, as this context inevitably influences the ways in which this co-construction unfolds and develops. The ‘findings’ generated from this inquiry process are in no way asserting an objective ‘truth’ of experiences of navigating identity for TExp spouses, but rather a co-constructed understanding of the subjective experiences of the participants. As participants express their lived experiences, my own subjective lens through which I interpreted their telling inevitably influenced the ways in which their stories were presented within the research data and analysis. As such, I humbly acknowledge that while I attempted to bring as much clarity and accuracy to the representation of these lived experiences, there exists limitations on representing the ‘truth’ of another’s experience, as these symbolically represented and interpreted ‘truths’ are necessarily coloured and co-constructed by my own contextual understanding of our dialogic encounter and mutual understanding.

When speaking of my contextual influence, it is important to be forthcoming regarding what my context is in relation to this area of inquiry. The relational consequence and fallout of trauma have captured my attention from a young age and set in motion my curiosities for the ways in which those intimately connected to someone exposed to trauma navigate their own identity and sense of wellbeing. I grew up as a child within a military household, beholden to the

intersectional challenges of traumatic exposure on relational functioning and dynamics.

Witnessing the challenges experienced by my family because of trauma exposure within my father's military service, I hold curiosity for the ways in which this reality impacted my mother's identity, having to carry the majority of the load of parenting and caretaking, while residing within the system as a 'military wife'.

Narrative Positioning

People engage with the world in a 'storied' way; meaning is attributed to our experiences through the ways in which we express and internalize the 'stories' of these experiences (Polkinghorne, 1988). Narrative inquiry resides within the qualitative paradigm, concerned with the ways in which people share and sequence the shaping of their lives and contexts (Chase, 2011; Moen, 2006). Our engagement with the world is based upon the stories developed and shared within our world.

Within narrative traditions, participants are understood as 'co-researchers', engaging in a dialogic and collaborative process of engaging with the story. Moen (2006) asserts three basic claims and three recurring issues within narrative research. The basic claims being: 1) human beings organize their experiences in the world into stories (narratives); 2) the stories shared are dependent upon context; and 3) each narrative has a multiplicity of voices within it that represent various levels of experience. The issues Moen proposes are: 1) the quality of relationship between the knower and would-be-knower; 2) the complexity of the process of conveying a narrative from direct experience to symbolic representation (through language, writing etc.); and 3) the ongoing complexity of interpretation inherent within narrative research. The utilization of narrative inquiry within qualitative research must consider these basic claims and issues to proceed in a manner that is ethical, being mindful of the nuances encapsulated within such an

approach. My research questions (investigating how TExp spouses navigate a sense of personal identity) invites participants to tell their story, sharing the layered and complex narratives that form the basis of their lived experiences, creating an opportunity for thick descriptions. Mischler (1986, as cited in Chase, 1995) asserted that humankind is naturally drawn to sharing experiences in a ‘storied’ way, regardless of the approach/style of the researcher; as such, approaching my research with intentionality in creating space for a ‘storied telling’ is appropriate within my area of inquiry. This approach is referred to as a ‘narrative-styled interview’.

The Narrative-Styled Interview

As with the broader methodological framework of ‘narrative methodology’, narrative-styled interviews emphasize the storied ways in which we organize and convey our experiences, emerging as complex and nuanced narratives that weave the fabric of our ‘lived experience’. This approach acknowledges that any attempt to gather insight and thick descriptions of a phenomenon experienced by another person ultimately results in these experiences residing within a ‘story’. As such, a narrative-styled interview honours the storied ways in which knowledge is conveyed and allows space for the participants’ ‘storied experiences’ to unfold in an organic manner. I engaged with each participant by inviting them to ‘tell me the story of how their identity is impacted by their position as a spouse of a TExp’. I anticipated that this process would unfold in a non-linear way as participants revealed different aspects of their storied experiences of navigating identity in relation to the research question; to assist participants who may have felt stuck or overwhelmed by the open-ended nature of such an inquiry, I also prepared a set of questions to guide us in our dialogue when needed.

Within the narrative discipline, narrative accounts can be analyzed in a variety of different ways (e.g., content themes, structural properties, meaning-making) (McAdams, 2011).

The scope of ‘narrative’ approaches is broad and encompasses a wide array of both data collecting and data analysis. It is important to offer a distinction between narrative interviewing (gathering the data) and narrative analysis. Narrative interviewing is conveyed by Chase (2005) as a method that facilitates the telling of a story, a modality wherein the natural inclination towards storytelling can be harnessed. Narrative analysis generally approaches the data in understanding the story as a complex, layered ‘plot’ (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 5); although I could have approached the data analysis through a narrative lens, I chose to utilize thematic analysis instead, as this methodology fits well with a narrative-style interview providing a sound approach to generating and presenting themes within qualitative data. My study utilized thematic analysis, outlined below to demonstrate the ‘fit’ and appropriateness for the research.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis (TA) is a “method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). TA remains a flexible and accessible approach to analyzing data from a variety of epistemological and theoretical foundations, providing rich analysis of complex and nuanced phenomena. A commonly misconstrued conception of TA is that by engaging with this method of analysis, themes and patterns ‘emerge’ from the data or are ‘found’ within the data; this assumption conveys a false sense of objectivity, whereas the researcher is actually an active participant in the identification of themes, impacted by their own experiences and biases. Boyatzis (1998) outlines that “observation precedes understanding. Recognizing an important moment (seeing) precedes encoding it (seeing it as something), which in turn precedes interpretation. Thematic analysis moves you through these three phases of inquiry” (p. 1). As such, it is imperative for researchers to clearly demarcate their positionality in

relation to the research to ensure transparency in the process of decision making within what constitutes a significant ‘theme’ or ‘code’.

Braun and Clarke (2006) outline a series of considerations that must be addressed prior to, and continually throughout the thematic analysis process, briefly outlined below.

What counts as a theme?

A theme is defined as an important, meaningful, and recurring response found throughout the data as it relates to the research question. Naturally, themes identified as ‘significant’ or ‘meaningful’ will be based on the researcher’s subjective and contextual understanding of the narratives presented. Rather than approaching this inevitability as a threat to TA, Braun and Clarke (2021) conceptualise researcher subjectivity as a resource for knowledge production, as it is this subjectivity that, transparently expressed, produces the reflexive process. Themes are understood as being “actively created by the researcher at the intersection of data, analytic process, and subjectivity” (Braun & Clarke, 2019). Reflexive TA is not primarily concerned with adhering to a strict coding procedure, but rather with the researcher’s thoughtful engagement with the research, their reflexive positionality of being an active agent in the process (Braun & Clarke, 2019). To ensure that themes are adequately representing the co-created understanding experienced between the researcher and participants, themes were vetted by a community of the adequate (as outlined within the three strands of valid knowing). The themes were examined by my thesis supervisor, the participants themselves, and finally by my thesis committee during the final defense process.

Rich Description of the Data Set Versus Detailed Account of One Aspect

Braun and Clarke (2006) relay that the scope and breadth of their data set is at the discretion of the researcher. My particular research questions focused on specific aspects of

identity navigation within the overarching experience of being a ‘spouse of’ a TExp. For that reason, I focused on identifying themes that corresponded with focus.

Inductive/Deductive Thematic Analysis

The ways in which themes/patterns are constructed within TA fall within two categories: inductive and deductive. Deductive analysis positions the researcher as approaching the identification of themes through the lens of existing research and theory, exploring the evidence for themes that have been identified in previous literature (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Conversely, inductive analysis does not approach the data with predetermined themes of interest but rather seeks to identify themes organically. The current study employed inductive thematic analysis, approached through a focus on broad thematic patterning, attentive to the themes that were grounded within the data rather than approaching themes with pre-determined assumptions and sets of codes/ thematic interests (Braun and Clarke, 2021).

Semantic versus Latent Themes

Braun and Clarke (2006) distinguish between semantic and latent themes within TA. Semantic themes refer to themes that are constructed based on the explicit, surface meaning found within the data; the researcher doesn’t engage in interpreting underlying messages besides what was directly stated by the participants. Latent themes are ones in which the researcher interprets implicit themes underlying what was explicitly stated by participants. In summation, semantic themes are more descriptive (albeit still identified subjectively, as discussed previously), while latent themes involve theorization.

As this study sought to engage participants regarding their lived experiences, approaching knowledge-gathering and data from a co-constructed understanding, semantic themes were most appropriate. Following Wilber’s third strand of valid knowing (validation by the community of

the adequate), the narrative interview style allows for the researcher to seek clarity within the story and ask questions to ensure the greatest amount of mutual understanding is being achieved. In this way, semantic themes are more readily endorsable and appropriate when engaging with nuanced lived experiences. These considerations guided my engagement with the research process and facilitated a consistency with my stated objectives within this study in relation to thematic analysis.

Thematic Analysis Process

Braun and Clarke (2006) identify six phases within TA: (1) familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) generating initial codes (i.e., organizing the data into meaningful groups), (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing and refining the identified themes, (5) defining and naming the themes, and (6) producing a written report.

Phase 1: Familiarizing oneself with the data

Familiarizing oneself with the data is the first essential component in TA in which the researcher immerses themselves in the data by reviewing transcripts in detail by personally transcribing the interview through the review of taped recordings of the interview. (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

During transcription I formed initial notes of my perceptions of possible themes. These initial notes served as the genesis of data analysis, creating a preliminary coding structure to be further expanded on in phases to follow. These initial notes included my general observations on participants' thematic comments, for example that in many transcripts there was a general flavour of identity being a challenging but important concept in participants' journeys, referencing that it was something that would often be overlooked in their daily rhythms, due to the energy output placed in caring for family.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

In phase two, preliminary codes are generated through a thorough and structured review of the data. A code is a basic set of data that is defined by the researcher as holding significant meaning and importance in relation to the research question. Although falsely used interchangeably within some literature, codes and themes are distinctive based on the complexity represented by each respectively. Codes capture observations with a singular idea or facet; themes are constructed from codes and are likened to a multi-faceted crystal, with Braun and Clarke (2019) describing themes as holding,

“a core, an ‘essence’, which is evident through different facets, each presenting a different rendering of the ‘essence’. While staying ‘close to’ the data, themes in reflexive TA often reflect patterns at both a broader, and more ‘abstracted’ level than codes” (p. 208).

The process of coding the data marks the beginning of organizing the data into meaningful categories (Braun and Clarke, 2012). Manual coding was utilized during this stage, as I highlighted meaningful patterns in the data through the highlighter tool in Microsoft Word; in addition to using the highlighter function, I attached preliminary codes to each highlighted segment with the ‘comments’ function in Microsoft Word. Preliminary codes included brief words or phrases such as “holding all the pieces”, or “managing environment”.

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

A theme is defined by Braun and Clarke (2006) as a construct that “captures something important about the data in relation to the research question, and that represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p. 82). For themes to be generated, codes must be organized into thematic groups. Defining and determining a theme is at the discretion of

the researcher and is based upon their unique perception of what is of importance within the data (as there are no concretely established rules or guidelines for determining themes within the reflexive TA process).

Once all sections of the transcripts that answered the research question were highlighted and initial codes were captured in the comments tool, I combined all similar codes into more general groupings on a separate document. Collating similar codes then lead to the generation of general theme categories that I reviewed and edited with my supervisor, refining the wording, or regrouping as necessary. An example of a theme that was generated in this process was “I became the preventor”, emergent from the codes that included those named above (i.e., “managing environment”, “holding all the pieces”).

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

The purpose of this phase is to create a more refined collection of themes by critically analyzing the identified themes, determining ways in which these thematic categories may be collapsed, eliminated, or combined. Within this phase exists two stages. The first stage involves the researcher returning to their coded data and determining whether the identified themes accurately represent and reflect the meaning encased within the data and codes. If meaningful patterns are verified as accurately representing the data, the researcher can continue onto stage two. If not, the researcher must take time to re-examine the themes and determine themes and categories that more accurately represent the data. This stage is designed to ensure that the complexity of the data is accurately reflected in the thematic analysis. Once the themes are verified as sufficient reflections of the meaning held within the data, the second phase can commence, during which the appropriateness of themes – in relation to the entire data set – is considered (if the themes generated reflect/address the research question).

Themes were continually reviewed with my supervisor as we carefully considered their relevance to the research (do they directly answer the research question?) and continually referenced back to the transcripts to ensure that context was appropriately represented.

Phase 5: Defining and Describing Themes

This phase is concerned with determining whether the identified themes are unique, related to one another, but still holding a unique focus that does not overlap with the other identified themes. Themes must be examined to determine if they fit with what the research question aimed to address. The process of reviewing themes was completed in a strict manner of ensuring that each theme was a direct answer to the research question; each selected/representative quote uniquely and clearly fits within the determined theme.

Following the determination of themes, each theme was then sent to participants for validation. For the themes that appeared in the interview transcripts of participants, the participants' corresponding quote, as well as a description of the theme, was sent to each participant. If a theme was not present in a participant's interview transcript, the participant was sent a description of the theme and given the opportunity to endorse the theme, despite not having spoken to the theme in their interview (represented and described in chapter 4 as 'post-interview endorsement' (PIE)). Participants were asked to provide a simple 'yes' or 'no' as to whether they validated that the theme accurately captured their quote, and a 'yes' or 'no' if they endorsed the themes that they had not spoken to in their interviews.

Phase 6: Producing the Report

This final stage in thematic analysis can only be embarked upon once the researcher is satisfied that the themes created are accurate accounts of what they have deemed important within the data. As such, the written report (the Discussion chapter) provides a rich portrayal of the nuances

of the data collected, summarized within the themes. The themes are described in relation to the research question and the ways in which the data provides insight into the topic of inquiry.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Thematic Analysis

Due to the relative epistemological flexibility of TA, this method can be modified to fit the needs of a diverse array of studies, enabling the account of rich and complex data. TA has additionally shown to be an effective form of analysis for emerging/novice researchers, as the method is relatively quick to learn with few complex procedures and prescriptions. This approach also assists the researcher in distilling large quantities of data into digestible themes as the researcher applies a systematic and structured approach to the data (Newell et al., 2017).

Although the flexibility of TA proves beneficial in some respects, this can also pose challenges in maintaining consistency within TA broadly, as there exists less defining literature than can be found within other approaches (such as ethnography or grounded theory). These challenges can be remedied by ensuring the researcher remains grounded in an explicit epistemological position that creates coherency in the study's claims (Newell et al., 2017). As this study follows Wilber's three strands of knowing couched within a social constructionist lens, the potential hazards of TA are mediated.

Evaluating the Study

Trustworthiness of Analysis

Data analysis has been considered the most complex phase of qualitative research as the researcher is tasked with distilling the complex data into meaningful findings, simultaneously attempting to capture the essence of their dialogic encounter with participants while acknowledging the contextual frameworks of the researcher themselves and that the results obtained from the research is a co-creation. As such, if researchers fail to provide clarity as to the

ways in which the data was analyzed, evaluating the trustworthiness of the research process is challenging (Nowell et al., 2017). As the researcher is the ‘instrument’ for analysis – making judgments regarding codes, generating themes, contextualizing the data – it is the researcher’s responsibility to demonstrate credibility through disclosing the steps contained within the analysis, and the researcher’s positionality; continual reflexivity regarding my positionality in relation to the study is required.

My own positionality as the researcher is disclosed in chapter 1 of this paper, naming my own personal experience of being a child of a TExP. Additionally, chapter 5 of this thesis provides some clear examples of the nuanced discussions that were held between myself and my supervisor (Tim Black) regarding themes, for example what defines an agentic mechanism of identity navigation versus a more passive conveyance of ‘what it’s like’ to be a TExP spouse. Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined the concept of ‘trustworthiness’ as encompassing the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability; the ways in which I took up these concepts throughout the data collection and analysis process is explicated below.

Credibility

Credibility references the congruence between participants’ views and the researcher’s portrayal/representation of them (Nowell et al., 2017). Credibility is attained by maintaining consistent ‘checks’ throughout the data collection and analyzation process, testing preliminary categories and member checks (checking in with the participants to ensure that they concur with the representation of their experience). To test preliminary categories, I engaged in weekly meetings with my supervisor wherein we would review the most current thematic groupings by reviewing each quote that represented within the theme to see if it adequately matched the theme description at present. An example of such discussions was one in which we debated the

accuracy of a theme I had determined: ‘validation in the role of ‘spouse’; upon further examination and discussion/collaboration, we determined that a more accurate representation of the quotes was “I found other people that gave me perspective on who I was’. The latter represented more fully the participants’ conveyance of gaining diverse exterior perspectives rather than a narrower pursuit/experience of ‘validation’ from others regarding their identity.

As described above in the TA methodological process, member checks were conducted following thematic analysis wherein participants were given the opportunity to endorse whether their quotes fit the prescribed theme. All participant quotes that were sent to participants for theme validation were validated by the corresponding participant.

Transferability

Transferability in qualitative research refers to the extent to which the results are explicitly and sufficiently contextualized so that the reader may reasonably judge the utility of applying the data within other contexts. The researcher is responsible for providing thick descriptions of the data, providing opportunity for those who seek to transfer this data to their own research/study can accurately evaluate the transferability. Rich descriptions additionally facilitate comparisons with qualitative research in similar fields. In chapter 4, I contextualized the research by providing a brief overview of participant demographics. Additionally, clear and concise descriptions of each theme, and what they represented, were provided to ensure clarity.

Dependability

Dependability, otherwise referenced as consistency, speaks to the degree to which the research findings can be replicated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). However, as this qualitative inquiry is framed within a constructionist understanding, viewing participants’ expressions of their experiences as unique and subjective, replicability of findings is not a primary nor

attainable objective. Merriam (2009) suggested an alternative approach to evaluating consistency; if the themes generated by the researcher remain consistent with the collected data, the study can be deemed as consistent until further research provides findings that disprove what has been established. To further demonstrate consistency within the study, I employed audit trails, whereby I kept a document detailing the rationale behind my choices and decisions throughout the study (i.e., how I arrived at the present themes, member checks conducted, memos created during coding, and the evolution of thematic categories). For example, for quotes that eventually became the theme of 'I became the preventor', initial codes for quotes included: "holding lots of pieces", "managing the environment", "octopus mode" among others. Distilling these coded quotes down into "I became the preventor" was then approached through the initial thematic label of "I held all the pieces". After further examining each quote and its allegiance to that possible theme, in discussion with my supervisor, we determined that 'I held all the pieces' did not convey the agentic mechanism encapsulated within the participant quotes and was eventually determined to be 'I became the protector'. Detailed and nuanced discussions regarding an agentic mechanism versus a behavioural experience allowed me to arrive at this particular theme, discussed further in chapter 5.

Confirmability

Confirmability is the degree to which the researcher's interpretations of the data represent the data and do not solely emerge from the researcher's own bias and opinions. Just as the audit trail will provide a marked and systematic reference to my research choices and process, I kept a reflective document that tracked my biases as they showed up in the research that I periodically discussed with my supervisor. For example, one participant spoke to her experience of becoming an 'octopus'. In the initial stages of constructing themes, I created a theme utilizing this

participant's quote regarding her 'octopus mode' as 'I became a shapeshifter', continually adapting identity and behaviours to the environment; upon further discussion with my supervisor, we determined that a more accurate representation of the quote/data was what became the theme of 'I became the preventor' and that it was my own experiences as a child within the home of a TEXP that was colouring my desire for that quote to represent the shapeshifter identity. Uncovering these biases through discussion and careful examination of the data was an essential ingredient in adhering to confirmability. That being said, it is equally important to note that the constructionist paradigm recognizes the co-construction of data as an integral part of the research process, understanding the researcher as an active participant in the data collection process, speaking to the inevitability of the researcher's subjectivity and contextual experiences to be present within the representation of the data.

Participants

Sampling Method

The basic inclusion criteria were that all participants were intimately involved with a TEXP (as identified previously as a professional who, in the course of their regular work duties, is consistently and chronically exposed to traumatic events) for one year and had been cohabitating for the duration of that year. The "one-year" criteria served as a basis for having enough time in relationship to experience relational patterns and connection that would create the potential to pose an impact on the identity of the participant as being a 'spouse of'.

Participants were selected using non-probability (purposive) sampling. Purposive sampling was utilized to ensure that the researcher could engage with participants who were identified as having experienced the phenomenon in question and could engage in rich dialogue regarding these experiences with the researcher. The research poster was sent to a professional

contact of my supervisor, Dr. Tim Black; this professional contact was involved in a similar area of study and thus had access to a group of people who met the research criteria. The research poster was shared in these spaces and participants were invited to contact myself if they were interested in participating (self-nomination). Once participants were screened and had completed their interview, they were invited to share the research information with anyone else they thought might be interested and who fit the criteria (i.e., snowball sampling).

Ethical Considerations

The University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board (HREB) granted approval for this study prior to participant recruitment and interviewing. All elements of this study remained in strict adherence to the Tri-Council Policy (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2010) which concerns itself with the mitigating any potential risk to participants. The policy defines ‘minimal risk’ as:

(R)esearch in which the probability and magnitude of possible harms implied by participation in the research is no greater than those encountered by participants in those aspects of their everyday life that relate to the research (p. 23).

My research question and methodology were designed with this policy in mind. My research inquiry did not ask participants to engage with the research in a way that extended the risk associated with everyday life; asking participants to discuss matters related to concepts of identity does not reside outside of routine self-reflection activities and self-examination.

As an additional measure for safety and participant wellbeing, if, while discussing their lived experienced participants became visibly dysregulated/distressed, there were protocols in place to help mitigate this distress. Participants were invited to take breaks when they needed to

do so and were informed that the interview could be discontinued at any point. I was additionally prepared to offer information for mental health emergency support services available Canada-wide if required. There were no instances during the research process that this was required.

There was the potential for an element of inconvenience for participants in having to set aside time to meet with me to engage with the interview process. I attempted to reduce this inconvenience by remaining as flexible as possible, offering a variety of times during the day to conduct the video conferencing interviews. Participants were informed that they were welcome to withdraw their consent and participation from the study at any point in the preceding's without any negative consequences.

There existed the potential during recruitment that, due to the population from which this research drew its participants, some participants may have encountered Dr. Tim Black while participating in the Couples Overcoming PTSD Everyday (COPE) program of which Dr. Tim Black is a facilitator and co-founder. Participants were informed during the initial screening interview about who constituted the research team and it was made clear that there was in no way an obligation to participate (or not participate), based on affiliation or feelings of obligation towards Dr. Black. No participants stated any familiarity with Dr. Black nor experienced researcher identities as a barrier to their participation in the study.

Chapter Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the definitions of empiricism, grounding this qualitative study firmly within scientific inquiry, adhering to Wilber's three strands of valid knowing. The theoretical underpinnings of qualitative research methodology were discussed, providing an outline of my proposed data gathering and data analysis methods: narrative interviewing and

thematic analysis. Processes for evaluating the trustworthiness of the results were outlined and, finally, participant recruitment and ethical considerations were discussed.

Chapter 4: Results

Five participants were interviewed about their experiences of navigating identity, as a spouse of a TExP who is suffering from post-trauma symptoms. All five participants identified as white, cis-gender, females, engaged in heterosexual relationships with their spouses for more than 5 years, and all participants had at least one child. Participants engaged in a narrative-style interview that ranged from one to two hours and recorded interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a modified form of Braun and Clarke's (2006) Thematic Analysis as outlined in the Methodology chapter. The following chapter presents the co-constructed themes and the various levels of participant validation of those themes.

Although each theme determined in this study speaks to a unique aspect of identity navigation experienced by participants, themes are not disconnected from one another. There is a relationship between certain themes, as one aspect of identity navigation is often connected with one or more others, and these connections will be highlighted, as each theme is presented in detail in this chapter. A total of six themes were initially co-constructed by the researchers and validated by participants. Upon further reflection and analysis, the sixth theme, 'My needs took a backseat' was determined to not provide a clear or direct answer to the research question; however, this theme has been included in the findings and discussion to honour relational validity with participants – i.e., honouring the time and investment participants took to validate the themes – as well the ways in which the reflection and analysis regarding the inclusion/exclusion of this theme illustrates the complexity inherent in discussions of identity navigation (as will be discussed in the Discussion chapter of this paper).

The first theme, 'I became the protector', showcases the ways in which TExP spouses took on the identity of 'protector', actively seeking to protect their children or spouses from the

behaviours of the TExP. The second theme, ‘I became the preventor’, at first glance, appears reminiscent of the first theme, yet it encapsulates a more pre-emptive and proactive management of the environments the TExP encountered, to mitigate the potential trauma reactions and negative consequences for the TExP. Theme three, ‘I realized my needs are important’, speaks to TExP spouses’ recognition of how important it is to honour their own needs in the identity navigation process and the ways in which this recognition impacted their identity navigation. The fourth theme, ‘I found other people that gave me perspective on who I was’ speaks to the value in having exterior voices that shed light on identity. Theme number five, ‘I saw myself as more than one thing’ demonstrates the benefit that participants reported in expanding their understanding of self to encompass the possession of more diverse facets of identity (‘who I am’).

In the following section, each theme is presented with an explanation of what the theme encompasses, as well as an indication of the number of participants that spoke to this theme in their initial interviews, indicated by ‘evidenced in transcript’ (EIT), as well as the number of participants who later endorsed the theme after being presented with it during the member-checking process, indicated by ‘post-interview endorsement’ (PIE).

Theme 1: I became the protector (*EIT = 4, PIE = 5*)

The identity of protector, the active pursuit of facilitating safety for one’s partner, children, or self, was an important aspect identified by participants. Sometimes this protector identity was one of necessity in ensuring the safety and wellbeing of the family and individual members, softening the emotional fallout and sheltering children from the reality of the trauma symptomology in the household. At other times, the protector identity was one that was embodied to defend oneself from emotionally vulnerable and painful experiences that emerged

within encounters with their spouse's trauma symptomology. T.F described the protector identity that held responsibility for both the TExP as well as their children:

“So it was an ever changing role never knowing what the days challenge was going to be. But the challenge was never with us as a relationship, if that makes any sense - we are literally each others' best friends - so it was like, right now I have to be the protective caregiver and ya know, it was about protecting my family.”

T.F elaborated further:

“But I think my role shifted from being wife, to full on caregiver for quite a while, and then extra protective around my kids. So just trying to, we tried to shelter them a lot because at the time they were 7 and 9 so old enough to know something was going on but too young to really understand what was going on, so we tried to shelter and just kind of run interference.”

N.K relayed similar experiences in embodying this protector identity for her family:

“...you know there's a protection piece for everybody. So trying to protect [my husband] from, not feelings, but like negative experiences, and trying to soften the blow for the kids.”

S.B shared that she experienced the protector identity as a life-or-death necessity, as she experienced the need to protect her husband from his own mental health symptomology and behaviours:

“Because I guess the primary goal was keeping him alive. I saw the, and this is raw right, I guess the hurt inside, the desperation, the not wanting to be here, and that's really tough. And so again, that's my goal, was to keep my kid's dad alive.”

J.L experienced a different aspect of this protector identity as it related to protecting her sense of self:

“I was protecting myself I had this cloak, you know you can use the star trek terminology or whatever, but cloak is just the word that I've used, you know, to protect myself. It was actually a cloak of armor was really the best way to call it. Just to protect myself.”

During post-interview endorsement, M.B confirmed that she too experienced this aspect of identity navigation, stating that she “would even add [that she became the] protector of his

friendships and relationships with his extended family including his own parents”. Given that this theme was endorsed by all five participants following post-interview endorsement, this indicates the prevalence and significance of this aspect of identity navigation reported by TExP spouses. The ways in which the protector identity showed up was varied, whether protecting their children, protecting the TExP from themselves, or protecting self; however, the amount of energy and time expenditure devoted to this aspect of identity navigation appeared significant for these participants regardless of how this identity navigation presented itself. This theme relates in some respects to the next theme in that both identities involve a motivation to reduce the negative effects experienced by the TExP and those around them, yet they manifest in distinctly different ways.

Theme 2: I became the Preventor (*EIT = 4, PIE = 5*)

The identity of ‘preventor’ was a theme endorsed by all of the TExP spouses to prevent the TExP from encountering triggering stimuli in their environments, whether in the home or out in community/public spaces. Spouses reported the considerable amount of energy delegated to managing these environments in an attempt to reduce the risk of an emotional outburst, trigger, or dangerous situation for the TExP. Life would often revolve around the need to pre-emptively neutralize the risk of trauma behaviours by careful planning and attending to environmental hazards. M.B shared a metaphor to symbolize her experience of this identity navigation mechanism by likening her behaviour to occupying the role of an octopus:

“So I labelled this “the octopus mode”, so you’re holding 8 plates at once and you’re like “okay, this is my child, his needs - are they met? My husband, the groceries, the this, the that”. So you’ve got all these legs, and you’re trying to keep everything super steady and stable because ya know, you have to make sure there’s no ripples, because as soon as there’s a ripple, he’s out and the whole activity goes. So the octopus, that’s actually a good piece identity wise, I had forgotten about that. And let me be clear, I still pull out the octopus once and while. But I used to believe that my role was to be the octopus.”

Similar, N.K expressed this preventor identity by stating:

“And he just mentioned like in that location there were four different triggering emergencies that he had gone to and that that location was like an overwhelming one for him and it caught me off guard a little bit because there’s a lot of times where I pre-empt outings and pre-empt places that we’re going...”

T.F expressed the preventive measures she would take while in various environments with her TExP:

“I would make sure that - it adjusted as he became more comfortable - but it would be, ya know, we would go in and I would make sure that I was with him. So you would go to like a jack and jill or a wedding when he got to that point, or just anything, I couldn’t just be off talking to people, I had to make sure I stayed with him so I could watch that body language. And then we developed our own thing that if he reached out and squeezed my hand than I knew I had about 2 minutes to get him out of the building. It was basically like if he had enough. So, he didn’t have to verbally say anything, and you could be with a bunch of people, and there’s no time to say goodbye to everybody. It’s like “get me out because I’m done right?” so I just knew as soon as he squeezed my hand I’d be like “oh, we need to go see so and so” and then we’d literally get out the quickest exist.”

In the same way as Theme 1, the PIE of this theme (=5) showcases the prevalence of this reported identity navigation experience for participants. The responsibility internalized by participants to mitigate risk and manage environments for the TExP became an identity navigation experience of becoming the preventor; participants shared the lengths that they would go to predict a challenge in the environment and to neutralize any potential for conflict. For some participants this was carefully arranging the household flow and needs to the point of embodying this role of ‘octopus’, while for others it was demonstrated in the pre-emptive communication/signaling that they developed with their TExP spouse. In each experience relayed by these participants, there was a common identity assumed in which responsibility for actively coordinating and preventing the likelihood of behavioural or emotional turmoil was a significant aspect of their reported identity navigation experience.

As participants shared the energy investment required for both Themes 1 and 2 within identity navigation, the next theme presents a realization for some participants that amidst the experience of these first two identities, there was value in turning towards self and recognizing one's own needs.

Theme 3: I realized that my needs are important (*EIT = 3, PIE = 4*)

Recognizing and validating that 'my needs are important' was reported by participants, as an aspect of navigating identity as a TExp spouse. Participants shared that identifying their needs as equally important, placing themselves first, or attending to what they needed, amidst the challenges of their context, was intimately connected to their wellbeing and positively influenced their understanding of who they were. Taking time to assess what they need, and appropriately feeding these needs, provided participants with a sense of greater connection with their own identity. M.B expressed this realization eloquently when she said:

“And I feel like the number one lesson, the most important lesson that spouses have to learn, is that once you figured out as a spouse that you matter just as much, that your needs are just as important, arguably, maybe more, because if you don't answer your own needs to start with, everything goes to shit, for real. So I feel like, the number one discovery and like challenge and objective a spouse can and should have is: how do I figure out how to be me? To feed me. To recognize that I'm important.”

The sentiment of nourishing self and turning towards self for the sake of self is echoed by S.B when she said:

“Really putting me first and doing stuff for me, and filling my own bucket and learning how to, I guess rely on him or not rely on him for different areas of my life. And ya, I guess kept reinforcing the 'me' in this, not me as the wife, me as me first. Me as SB.”

J.L elaborated on this realization by speaking to ways in which setting boundaries for herself was a crucial aspect of realizing that her needs were important:

“I’m also learning something, how to set boundaries...I said “I need to do what I need to do to protect me. I will be with you and will hold your hand” - because the human interaction is important to help him recover – “but at some point I’m going to have to look after me and leave the room”. So that’s setting a boundary, I said “that doesn’t mean if you really need me you can still call me, but I’ve gotta look after me”.”

These quotes showcase the importance of this realization for participants in navigating identity as TExP spouses. Setting boundaries, filling one’s own bucket, feeding one’s own needs are all ways in which these participants expressed the importance of looking at oneself within the identity navigation process. Alongside the identities of ‘preventor’ and ‘protector’, there is an importance expressed in these quotes of turning towards self and nurturing one’s own needs amidst the pull to protect and prevent. This ‘Turning towards self’, and recognizing one’s own needs, also appears connected to the Theme 4, where noticing one’s needs can elevate the potential for finding other people that can offer an alternative perspective on identity.

Theme 4: I found other people that gave me perspective on who I was (*EIT* = 3, *PIE* = 5)

Participants shared that engaging with perspectives outside of themselves provided opportunities to better understand themselves and locate their identity within their contexts. Connecting with others, whether that be peers, therapists, friends, or learning spaces, helped participants put language to and form a more coherent narrative of who they were and who they could be within their circumstances.

S.B shared that the person she found was her therapist:

“I looked into a therapist for myself just not knowing what to do, I was miserable I’m crying all the time. Right? It’s just such a shock to the system, she certainly helped me figure out who I am and that I’m worthy and that what I’m doing is good and ya know, a lot of other people would have hit the high road and taken off but I had this drive in me to stay and to help and keep my family together. And I think it’s from all of that work with her where that sense of self really came to be.”

S.B. also shared that finding a group of people offered helpful perspectives on who she was:

“And I got incredible validation from the other women that I met [at TExP support group] that were going through or had gone through similar situations. And just in sharing our stories that’s very powerful as well. It helped me kind of form my narratives and my story in this with me as the star of the show not him. This is how I went through all of this. And changed that focus more to me. Again that group really did, it was that sense of self that, what do you need to do for you to look after you? ...its not selfish to put myself first.”

M.B similarly shared that engaging with a group of others helped her locate who she was:

“Before knowing [TExP support group] I was like, you know, I didn’t exist. There wasn’t, I was just, I don’t know, I was nothing and nowhere. There was nothing in regards to that. I was just, I guess what I was before I discovered the group, I was just a wife having a hard time; I was just a wife having a hard time with no understanding why. Because it took a few years before he was diagnosed, so my identity went from being just like a wife who was having a terrible time, to I was a [TExP] spouse.”

M.B shared further by stating:

“And then someone at the table said, and this was like a life-defining moment for me, someone said “if you’re serving someone who served their country, you’re serving your country”. And then like, boom, it was just like, wait what? For me, that moment, it was really like, how could I describe it, it sort of gave meaning to the hard work I was doing. It made me someone who could be really patriotic and feel like I’m contributing my part to this country. So it like created this identity for me which is “I’m not just the spouse-of, I’m also serving my country”.”

J.L expressed that both her therapist as well as an intentional learning environment contributed to her navigation of her own personal identity:

“In addition to talking with my therapist, I found out a number of different online seminars that I attended. And one woman in particular, there was so many things that I picked up, mental cues that I picked up from her to help find myself again.”

Participants reported that finding other people and engaging with alternative perspectives provided the spouses with the possibility of internalizing these alternate perspectives and allowing these perspectives to impact their identities. The places from which these alternate perspectives emerged from were varied across participants – therapy, support groups, educational material/coursework, colleagues – yet the defining factor for all participants was the importance of the outside perspective in speaking to their identity. Finding others that were able

to provide an alternative perspective on participants' identities, for some, connects to the next theme related to exploring a greater multitude of facets of their identities, outside of being a TExP spouse.

Theme 5: I saw myself as more than just one thing (*EIT* = 3, *PIE* = 5)

Participants shared that viewing their identity as encompassing more than the singular role of 'spouse', and finding spaces to assume these other roles, was beneficial in navigating identity. 'Who I am' was encapsulated within a greater range of roles and responsibilities outside the singular role of spouse or caregiver, and participants reported engaging in these roles within a workplace/career context, or within various circles of peers/friends. Embodying alternate identities from that of 'spouse of' provided a necessary outlet or break that fed their sense of themselves. T.F described this identity navigation mechanism well when she said:

“So I could go to work and be finance person that I am, and do my job. Which would give my brain, which would challenge my brain in a different way and give me that break from the caregiving side of things....and it's all those pieces right? It's those other identities besides...I don't think it's ever healthy to have only one identity. If that makes sense? Because you're more than one thing...I think you're more than just your job or more than being a mom or being a wife. I mean in this specific thing the wife, but you're more than just that one title. That's just, it should be a piece of who you are. A piece of your character. But not all encompassing... and I think because of those other pieces, in enable me to get through what we went through better. Because I wasn't just the spouse that was at home caregiving 24 hours a day not leaving the house, not doing other stuff. I had that escape, I had that ability to get away to take the break, to recharge, to be able to come back at the end of the day and say 'okay, now I have to switch back to caregiver, but I have to be this caregiver now', and I now have energy because I hadn't been doing it all day if that makes sense.”

M.B relayed a similar sentiment by speaking of 'parts' and seeing herself as more than one thing by speaking to these parts:

“And so there's some parts of my identity that's really out there, like plant-based eating sprouts and whatever. There's all kinds of parts of myself that is in there, and so I'll lean into that in that group. And so I think, so all of that to say, I think its normal that we lean into parts of our identity stronger in certain circumstances.”

M.B further expressed the importance of holding more than a singular identity when she said:

“...you’re experiencing this because you are a spouse of a trauma exposed professional. Right. Okay. That’s a label I can take on. That can be part of my identity. Not all.”

Similarly, N.K relayed the ways in which seeing herself as more than one thing emerged as a positive identity factor:

“well I do have a side hustle as a jewelry maker. And I think that is something that gives me a lot of peace, and in a way it can be very meditative. Some of the repetitive nature of it all. And so I think that’s something I’ve been doing over the last three years or so. And it does, it brings me some joy, it gives me my own side passion to work on and to put a lot of thought into so that my mind’s not always racing in other directions. I can be thinking about what I need to make next, or what I could make next. And so that’s been a really positive outlet.”

These quotes demonstrate the value that participants found within their identity navigation in holding more than a singular identity. Both M.B and T.F speak to the reality of being a ‘spouse-of’ to a TExp and that this facet of identity is real and tangible while also seeing value in accessing identities exterior from that of ‘spouse-of’. T.F describes the recharge that was possible when she was connected to these different facets of her identity (i.e., a finance person) and how this separate identity gave her greater capacity to then ‘care-give’ for her TExp. Seeing oneself as more than one thing seems to be a positive resource for identity navigation, according to these participants, within this population, leaning into parts of identity in different environments and allowing oneself to explore different facets of identity amidst the realities of being a TExp spouse.

Additional Findings

As mentioned in the introduction, a theme that was initially co-constructed during the study’s Thematic Analysis and endorsed by all participants is Theme 6.

Theme 6: My needs took a backseat (EIT = 5)

Although this theme is prevalent within the interviews and fully endorsed by participants, upon further reflection and analysis, the theme was determined to not have represented a direct answer to the research question. A more fulsome discussion regarding the rationale for its inclusion in the findings will follow in Chapter 5. However, although determined to not constitute a direct answer to the research questions, the theme demonstrates a common experience amongst the participants (as indicated by all 5 participants speaking to it in their interviews).

Theme 6 speaks to becoming smaller, relegating ‘self’ to back of mind, as the needs of the TExP and family take front stage. Spouses reported that their needs would often take a backseat role to elevate the needs of the TExP; spouses would assume a position of secondary importance to prioritize the wellbeing of the TExP and the family. N.K articulated this theme clearly when she stated:

“I think that it’s a backseat role. Or like a passenger driver role. Which can be irritating. It’s, it’s a supporting role. Like it’s obviously a supporting role. And I think that like the success of the family is completely requires for all of that to happen.”

M.B expressed a similar experience to being in a ‘passenger driver role’ by describing it as a place of secondary importance:

“So, I think by default what I’ve experienced and what I’ve seen other spouses experience is our first like default position is to become secondary in importance because your role kind of becomes “but what does he need? What can I do to support him?”

J.L shared that her needs taking a back seat showed up for her as ‘shutting down’, losing touch with what her needs might be and, in turn, losing a sense of identity in the process:

“Because when he was triggered, there was just, there was nothing I could say. There was nothing I could say. So I would just shut down, and I just stopped doing anything to confront or to argue, and all of that was gone. And consequently, what I ended up losing, this is why I wanted to talk about the bad news first, was I ended up losing my identity.”

T.F described herself as becoming very small:

“So the biggest impact for me personally would be having myself spread so thin, not spread thin, but spread amongst so many different things that my husband and his health became the focal point; so I guess for sort of that shorter period of time my larger circle of identity I guess became very small and very situated within the walls of my home basically was the number one priority. And then if there was anything left in the tank I guess you could say, then it would be extended to something outside of that.”

S.B experienced having to place everyone’s needs above her own which resulted in her own sense of self being relegated to back of mind:

“So it was a lot of – thank goodness the kids were in school – get the kids off to school in the morning, and then its focus on him to get through the day, get through the morning, like it really was hour to hour. So life just slowed way way down into this more granular sense of day and for me it was just ‘okay its go time’ like its crisis time we just need to make this work. So I was the back of my mind.”

Having their needs take a backseat was an experience endorsed by all participants and demonstrated a strong thematic response for the ways in which TExP spouses experience the realities of living alongside a TExP; the nuance of validating it as a theme while belatedly recognizing how it does not directly answer the research question will be further discussed in Chapter 5 - Discussion.

Six themes were co-constructed throughout the analysis of the five interviews. Five of these themes speak directly to the ways in which TExP spouses navigated their senses of identity within their positionality and provide insight into this agentic traverse through their identity landscape; this navigation showed up for participants in their value of finding others that provided alternative perspectives on their identity, recognizing that they are more than one thing, validating that their own needs are important and assuming the identities of preventor and protector. Actively embodying the identities of protector and preventor, showcased the ways in which TExP spouses’ contexts shaped their reported identity navigations and the mechanisms

through which these identities formed and influenced the TExP spouses. The meaning that these themes hold in relation to the literature, further research, and the counselling field will be discussed in the chapter to follow.

Chapter 5: Discussion

The purpose of this study was to investigate the ways in which spouses of TExPs suffering from post-trauma symptoms navigate a sense personal identity. This section will discuss the intersections of these findings with existing research as well as demonstrate the unique contributions of this study, in relation to the existing research. As explicated in Chapter 4, the process of identity navigation for TExP spouses holds aspects of challenge/sacrifice, while also holding empowering experiences of emancipation from a singular identity vortex of the ‘spouse-of’ construct.

Defining the mechanisms involved in identity navigation proved to be a more elusive subject in the research than anticipated. When asked about identity navigation, participants would often share what had happened to them and the ways in which they would cope with these happenings. Providing an answer to who they were in the midst of this challenge, how they actively navigated identity, seemed a much more elusive concept to grasp. The amount of space taken up by the TExP’s behavioural needs and the resultant family consequences seemed to overshadow much of the capacity for participants to truly examine the questions of ‘who am I?’ within that constellation. As discussed in the literature review, the identity-laden trauma exposed professions (such as military and law-enforcement) have embedded within their membership a sense of collective identity and a glorification of self-sacrifice for the greater good, facilitating a culture in which the needs of the whole are elevated against the needs of the individual. (Coll et al., 2011; Wehrman, 2021). The demand within these professions for both the active members and their spouses to prioritize the shared cultural identity of the profession perhaps demonstrates one reason for why these interview conversations exploring the navigation of independent identity proved very challenging and elusive. Although the current study has co-constructed

thematic ways in which spouses navigate their identities, the research interviews would often unintentionally sidestep the question of identity and have to circle back around to how these methods of coping and ways of being related to identity specifically. The ‘slipperiness’ of identity definition is not surprising given the considerable attention the topic has garnered and the diverse disciplines from which the study of self and identity has been approached; although it is experienced universally (one cannot exist without having formed a rudimentary concept of ‘who I am’), unearthing the *mechanisms* through which identity is navigated, and *how* it is navigated, in these contexts proved to be quite challenging at times both for the researcher and participants.

During the interviews, when participants were asked to share the ways in which a particular experiences altered, impacted, or shifted their navigation of identity, participants would often initially respond using language that conveyed themselves as a passive recipient of the environment, such as having things ‘happen to them’ (e.g. getting crushed, being overwhelmed, disappearing into the background); it often took time and effort on the part of the researcher to refocus the conversation and get to the heart of participants’ agentic identity-construction within their contexts, where they could express the ways in which they actively engaged in identity navigation in its various forms. This struggle to clearly articulate *how* one understands and navigates identity in these contexts raises an interesting commentary on the attention in the literature – or lack thereof – paid to identity construction within this population and shows the necessity of the continuation of research that elevates these voices and experiences.

Findings supported by the Literature:

Some of the findings of the current study coincide with and validate the existing literature in this area. The theme of “I became the protector” as well as the theme of ‘My needs took a backseat’, and “I realized that my needs were important” are all findings previously discussed in the literature review, with respect to TExp spouses’ experiences.

I became the protector

Two of the themes identified in this research, “I became the preventor” and “I became the protector” are connected to the literature concerning role-based identity navigation (Burke & Reitzes, 2016; Hogg & White, 1995; Soulsby & Bennett, 2017). These existing studies report that the roles one assumes within their environments, and the meaning attached to such roles, is intricately connected to how one understands one’s identity, and how one navigates a sense of purpose within one’s milieu. One of these themes, “I became the preventor”, although connected to the literature, is also unique to this study and will be discussed in the section to follow, as it discusses a role assumed by TExp spouses that has not, thus far, been addressed in the literature. However, the theme of “I became the protector” has been identified in past research and is spoken to in the literature (McGaw et al., 2020); although the existing literature does not explicitly reference the word ‘identity’ that is encapsulated within this role, past findings align very closely with the identity-role that participants communicated in this study. For example, participants in McGaw’s (2020) study labelled this role as “keeping the peace” (p.461), with one participant who relayed the feeling of “I just want to protect the kids from all that behaviour as much as I can” (p. 461). Waddell and colleagues (2016) relayed that spouses of military veterans expressed “wanting to protect their partners from the world” (p. 1608). Yambo and colleagues (2016) relayed that TExp spouses would “[take] measures to shield their children from hostility

and to prevent the children from triggering a symptom of PTSD”. The mantle of having to exercise an identity of ‘protector’ is one that rings true for TExP spouses already in the literature and this study contributes by naming this role and behaviour as an identity experience for this population. These findings presented in the literature resonate strongly with the responses from participants of this study; T shared, “so it was like right now I have to be the protective caregiver and ya know, it was about protecting my family”.

McGaw and colleagues (2020) comment on the increased hypervigilance experienced by spouses when faced with the unpredictability of the TExP’s PTSD symptomology, and the resultant burden of protection spouses often assumed for themselves, their children, and the TExP in response to this unpredictability. Additionally, as the TExP can become increasingly unable to reliably and safely engage in parenting tasks, protecting children from any dangerous potentiality can become a critical concern for many spouses (Beks, 2016; Roth & Moore, 2009). The capacity of the remaining parent to provide support for and connection with their children has been shown to be a protective factor in the children’s wellbeing and is, thus, a priority for some TExP spouses out of necessity and concern for the safety of their children (Comer et al., 2014; Duarte et al., 2006; Uchida et al., 2018). As this burden of protection fell on the spouses, the identity of ‘protector’ was endorsed by participants as an element of their identity constellation, assuming responsibility for the safety of themselves and the family.

In conjunction with the literature, T shared that this would often look like “running interference” or “sheltering” the children from the full impact of the trauma symptomology. N.K shared this sentiment by stating, “you know there’s a protection piece for everybody. So, trying to protect [my husband] from, not feelings, but like negative experiences, and trying to soften the blow for the kids.” Participants also spoke to their role of having to protect the TExP from the

TEXP's own volatility and emotional vulnerability, in some cases having to go so far as to protect the life of their spouse from suicidality. S.B shared this experience by stating, "Because I guess my primary goal was keeping him alive. I saw the, and this is raw right, I guess the hurt inside, the desperation, the not wanting to be here, and that's really tough. And so again, that's my goal, was to keep my kid's dad alive."

Being the 'protector' is clearly evident in both the existing literature and the present study, providing further support for relevance of this identity experience for TEXP spouses.

I realized that my needs are important

Interestingly, only one existing study spoke to the importance of TEXP spouses honouring their own needs as a mechanism related to identity navigation (Rossetto, 2009). Other studies spoke to the importance of finding coping strategies to manage one's experience of being a TEXP spouse, for example emotional acceptance and mindfulness (Kees & Rosenblum, 2015), movement and exercise (Blank et al., 2012) and keeping busy (Lapp et al., 2010), but Rossetto's study is unique in the connections it draws between recognizing needs and identity navigation. The apparent lack of attention given to the relationships between TEXP spousal needs and identity points to the likely importance of filling this connectivity gap to better support this population in addressing these needs.

Rossetto's (2009) study speaks to the importance of self-enhancement opportunities in TEXP spouses' conceptualization of identity while the military member spouse was deployed. Participants in Rossetto's study spoke to the empowered realization of the importance of doing things themselves for themselves when their spouses were deployed, putting themselves first, and the ways in which this bolstered a sense of self-confidence in who they were. One of Rossetto's participants relayed this sentiment by saying "When he left I realized that my first job

was to take care of myself, that nobody else is gonna take care of me. I have to take care of heart, I have to take care of spirit...Now I get to be a person different than just someone attached to another person” (p.71).

Participants in this current study relayed similar sentiments in relation to how they navigated identity as TExP spouses and the importance of attending to their own needs, despite what may be occurring in their particular contexts. S.B shared her realization in this regard, stating: “really putting me first and doing stuff for me, and filling my own bucket and learning how to, I guess rely on him or not rely on him for different areas of my life. and ya and I guess kept reinforcing the ‘me’ in this, not me as the wife, me as me first”. J.L also expressed this eloquently, stating, “I’m also learning something, how to set boundaries...I said “I need to do what I need to do to protect me. I will be with you and will hold your hand” – because the human interaction is important to help him recover – “but at some point I’m going to have to look after me and leave the room”. So that’s setting a boundary, I said “that doesn’t mean if you really need me you can still call me, but I’ve gotta look after me””.

Both the current study and Rossetto’s speak to the connection between identity navigation and validating one’s own needs as important within TExP spousal contexts and demonstrate the strength of this aspect of identity navigation.

Additional Findings Discussion

The theme, ‘My needs took a backseat’ posed an interesting challenge during data analysis and provides a noteworthy commentary on the complexity of researching identity. As explicated in Chapter 4, this theme was initially determined as answering the research question and was sent to participants for validation. It was not until further discussion and careful contemplation as researchers that it was determined that we, too, had conflated the passive voice/experience of

‘doing’ with the identity experience of the navigation of ‘being’; there is a difference between someone saying “my needs took a backseat” and “I became a backseater”, or “I *put* my needs in the backseat”. The former, as participants spoke to in this study, may seem on first brush to answer the research question of TExP spouses’ identity navigation, yet, in actuality, is a response to what happened to them as a result of being a TExP spouse (that their needs took a backseat role). The difference here may seem subtle, yet there lies a difference of agentic purpose in the other themes, where “I did [blank]” to actively navigate identity in this space, is not conveyed in this theme. Rather, this theme speaks more directly to what happened to their needs and was therefore determined to not be a clear answer to the research question. Nonetheless, as this theme was already endorsed by participants, and clearly articulated with quotes, it seemed pertinent to include the theme in Chapter 4 and then to discuss its relevance in the current chapter, to honour the time and attention given by participants in reviewing and endorsing it. As such, the theme will be briefly discussed as it relates to the literature and how it contributes to the existing field of research.

Norris et al. (2018) reported on the diminished capacity of spouses to maintain their personal space and boundaries as the needs of the family and TExP occupied the family constellation. This diminished capacity for boundary setting and personal space needs appears the same as the identified theme discussed by participants of ‘my needs took a backseat role’. Numerous studies spoke to the caregiving burden placed upon TExP spouses which resulted in feelings of depletion and exhaustion (Calhoun et al., 2002; Skomorovsky et al., 2017), as spouses would “assume a more supportive role for their partner, sometimes at the expense of their own comfort and wellness” (Casas & Benuto, 2021, p. 214), which could lead them “to feel isolated, lonely, and as if their needs were unimportant or illegitimate because they felt that their needs

should always be subjugated to the needs of their spouse” (Regehr et al., 2005 as cited in Casas & Benuto, 2021 p. 215). In this present study, M.B shared a similar sentiment when she expressed, “So, I think by default what I’ve experienced and what I’ve seen other spouses experience is our first like default position is to become secondary in importance because your role kind of becomes “but what does he need? What can I do to support him?”.

Although one might argue that including this theme in the Results and Discussion chapters is unnecessary, based upon the realization of it not directly answering the research question, it provides a noteworthy commentary on the challenge of pinpointing mechanisms of identity navigation even for researchers who are directly asking the questions and deeply engaged in the analysis. The fact that it was not determined as a theme outside of the research inquiry until after participant validation showcases how nuanced such conversations can be, and therefore perhaps makes a case for the importance of pursuing research in this area to better understand and support the complexity of identity navigation within this population.

Unique Contributions to the Literature

Several of the co-constructed themes in this study do not appear to be evident in the relevant literature and, as such, constitute unique findings and contributions of the current study. Existing literature speaks robustly to the ‘experience’ of being a spouse-of in various contexts (being a military spouse, police spouse, first responder spouse), the challenges that cling to and overshadow in these spaces, and the coping modalities employed, yet the literature thus far has not appeared to include exploration of Themes 3, 4, and 5 from the current study, focused specifically on identity navigation for TExp spouses. Rather than approaching participants’ lived experiences through the lens of the passively received impacts of burnout and STS, an agentic process was assumed from the outset in this study, attempting to explore how spouses actively

navigated identity. In addition to acknowledge the very real impacts on these individuals, there is also possibility and opportunity for movement, change, empowerment, and self-understanding when TExP spouses are seen as active agents in navigating their own identities.

Existing studies have detailed the effects of being a spouse-of, the pain, challenges, honour, depletion; this study, by contrast, attempted to go a step further by asking how spouses navigate *identity* when living in these contexts. The results of this study are encouraging in that, despite the initial challenges and tendencies to speak about the received negative impacts, participants were able to talk about their identities and name the ways in which they navigated them, the mechanisms through which they maneuvered through their contexts, and how they embodied various identities within these contexts. The themes of “I saw myself as more than one thing”, “I found other people that gave me perspective on who I was”, and “I became the preventor” are all unique themes that provide insight into the mechanisms of identity navigation for TExP spouses.

I saw myself as more than one thing

The more broad-based literature concerning identity construction (e.g., Burke & Reitzes, 2016), speaks to the meaning derived from the collection of roles and responsibilities with which one engages, as well as finding avenues for the expression and manifestation of varying facets of identity. In that context, the self is understood as an elaborate construction and embodiment of multiple identities, molded by the environments and contexts with which one engages (Hogg & White, 1995). Rossetto’s (2009) study also spoke to a theme reminiscent of “I saw myself as more than one thing” when a participant spoke to the realization of needing to find ways of describing themselves in a way that was differentiated from their spouse’s career title (“Now I get to be a person different than just someone attached to another person” (p. 72)). However,

although Rossetto's participant noted the importance of differentiating themselves from their spouses' career, they did not speak to the active pursuit of navigating identity by being more than one thing ("I am ____"), which the current study explored specifically, and which was eloquently conveyed by T when she stated, "So I could go to work and be the finance person that I am, and do my job. Which would give my brain, which would challenge my brain in a different way and give me that break from the caregiving side of things."

As discussed in Chapter 2 - Review of the Literature, Ben Arzi et al. (2000) also spoke to this concept of differentiation, defined by the authors as separation-individuation (establishing a distinct sense of self). Ben Arzi and colleagues found that a greater degree of separation-individuation exercised by the participants led to decreased levels of secondary traumatic stress. Although the Ben Arzi et al. (2000) study provides insight into the benefit of TExP spouses having a separate identity, their study did not specifically address *how* this was achieved or navigated, nor the mechanisms by which these TExP journeyed towards this trajectory. Knowing that a separate sense of identity may be important and determining how this is done are two distinct findings. The current study focused specifically on the latter, as participants shared that seeing themselves as more than one thing was one mechanism which they used or engaged in their identity navigation.

It is not surprising to discover that possessing facets of identity that expand beyond the role of being a 'spouse of' or caregiver would factor into the navigation of identity for spouses of TExPs. Finding places where one's identity can be something other than a 'spouse of' challenges the natural tendencies of many spouses and families to channel their energy and attention towards the betterment of the TExP. As discussed in the broader literature regarding caregiver burden, experiencing identity loss through identity-engulfment (solely identifying as the

‘caregiver’ in these spaces) is a commonly reported experience amongst spouses of ill and injured persons. This study furthered this foundational understanding of identity-engulfment and identity-loss by highlighting how assuming more than a singular identity seemed to spark something different for participants, a change in rhythm or shift in mental stimulation that allowed for a brief respite from the challenges of the spousal role and singular spousal identity. Allowing oneself to try on different garments of identity allowed for the feeding of self and ultimately resulted participants reported experiences of a more grounded understanding of ‘who I am’.

It is important to also note that the importance of establishing parts of identity outside that of ‘spouse of’ need not diminish the positive experiences of pride and honour in carrying the ‘spouse of’ identity/role that past research addresses. Research studies have shown the sense of purpose and meaning that spouses have found in connection to their TExP spouse role (e.g., Casas & Benuto, 2021; Porter & Henriksen, 2016); a meaningful sense of duty and sacrifice can accompany the ‘spouse of’ identity in supporting the active member and is an identity that is proudly donned by many. In the current study, T. F expressed this sense of honour in walking alongside her TExP spouse stating, “so basically him saying ‘here’s my life in your hands please help me get better’, that was an honour to have that. Like, yes, it’s a responsibility but I look at it more as an honour that he would trust me to do that.”. T.F shared that the responsibility of the ‘spouse of’ identity came with challenges but was also a part of her that she carried with pride and gratefulness for the faith with which she was entrusted. Holding both identities in awareness, celebrating this sense of pride and honour of being a spouse of, while also recognizing the importance of alternate identity expression(s), may be an important factor in navigating identity for TExP spouses.

I found other people that gave me perspective on who I was

The research literature reviewed in Chapter 2 indicated that ‘selves’ identify in relationship. As the TExP spouses in the current study engaged with ‘someone else’, this interaction provided a perspective previously unfamiliar to them, in which they could find meaning and identity. As discussed in Chapter 2, input from the environment influences the construction and understanding of identity (Hogg & White, 1995); Soulsby & Bennett, 2017) and identity is understood as a “social product” (Burke & Reitzes, 2016, p. 84). This is demonstrated in this study as participants shared the influence of finding others (therapists, friends, peers, courses) who could provide an alternate perspective on their positionality. As participants encountered a more nuanced understanding of their own needs through relational connection with others, they were better able to understand who they were within this context. For example, M.B relayed this experience eloquently as she shared that when she was able to engage with a group of women in a support group, she said “it created this identity for me which is “I’m not just the spouse-of, I’m also serving my country”. Although this research aligns with these pre-existing models of self-development regarding the importance of an ‘other’ in locating identity, this research study offers unique findings in relating this identity navigation journey for TExP spouses.

Engaging with peers who have lived similar circumstances has been discussed in the literature as a valuable coping measure for TExP spouses (Brady et al., 2019; Brodie & Eppler, 2012; Karaffa et al., 2015; Roth & Moore, 2009; Shakespear-Finch et al., 2002), and has been anecdotally noted in numerous blog sites and online support groups/forums for TExP spouses (i.e. heelsandholster.com; hiddenheroes.org; projectsanctuary.com. The literature reports that feelings of loneliness and isolation are challenges, whose antidote was finding like-others who

could relate to the challenging reality (Brodie & Eppler, 2012; Karaffa et al., 2015). Although the literature states that finding these people and spaces to validate the challenges of the spousal positionality was a beneficial coping factor, these studies reviewed did not speak to the identity navigation mechanism encapsulated within intentionally seeking others' perspectives in relation to 'who I am'. This speaks to the importance of TExP spouses seeking out others as a means of navigating their understanding of the identities possessed by the self, gaining perspectives of who they are, and venturing outside of an insular way of being to engage with different perspectives that provide clarity in identity navigation.

I became the 'preventor'

Delineating between the two themes of becoming a 'preventor' and becoming a 'protector' is important to make explicit, as the behaviours of these two roles both arise from an intent to reduce harm. Yet, based on the reported experiences of spouses in the current study, the two would appear to manifest in different ways. The identity of protector could be considered more response-based, or perhaps a behavioural move to action born out of the recognition of an immediate need or threat in the environment. The preventor role, by contrast, is one of careful and deliberate planning that is proactive and intentionally managerial of individuals and/or the environment, in an effort to subdue, dampen, or avoid negative occurrences. Although the behavioural embodiment of the 'protector' identity has been identified and discussed in the literature, this balancing act that is assumed in the embodiment of the 'preventor' identity has been thus far unnamed. Protectors, ultimately, seek to prevent, but not all preventative maneuvers are intentionally protective in nature. While the identity experiences of 'preventor' and 'protector' thematically identified within this research were endorsed as separate identity

categorizations by participants, they are not mutually exclusive and in further research may be shown to embody a singular identity experience.

In the current study, becoming the ‘preventor’, a proactive, pre-emptive, patterned way of being, is an identified concept that appears to be a unique contribution to the literature. Although the literature discusses the concept of “compensatory emotional regulation” (Sharp et al., 2022) - an experience of the diminishment of one’s emotional needs to avoid or neutralize potential conflict (Davidson et al., 2006; Roberts & Levenson, 2001; Thompson et al., 2005) – and discusses protective buffering (Joseph & Afifi, 2010), or ‘walking on eggshells’ (Beks, 2016), this regulatory approach, wherein TExP spouses tread carefully around the TExP to avoid the potential of challenging encounters, these are both different from the identity of ‘preventor’ that the current study’s participants spoke to in actively pursuing and navigating their identity. The behavioural response or adaption of ‘walking on eggshells’ is seemingly different from the agentic embodiment of ‘I am an eggshell walker’, or ‘I carefully arrange the eggshells so as to avoid a disruption’; ‘I became the preventor’ relays a measure of acquired competence in the intentional management of the environment.

While one might presume that delineating between compensatory behaviour and the role of ‘preventor’ is merely semantic in nature, there appears to be nothing in the reviewed literature on compensatory behaviour that speaks to identity and the ways in which compensatory behaviours embraced factored into the conceptualization and navigation of identities. The co-constructed theme of the ‘preventor’ identity adds a nuance to the existing literature, as it speaks to an active, agentic move towards a change in the understanding of one’s identity and way of ‘being’ in context. The active language implied in becoming the ‘preventor’ contrasts much of the literature that discusses the experiences of TExP spouses as recipients of these challenging

environments, passively experiencing the challenging effects by subduing/withdrawing/numbing their emotional needs, which are important aspects of these complex situations and relationships. However, the proactive and pre-emptive ‘preventor’ identity that participants endorsed in this research speaks more directly to the ways in which these participants actively navigated identity as a TExP spouse. There seems to be movement and active choice, inherent in this role to ‘prevent’, to plan, to coordinate all movements and possibilities (inclusive of internal emotional reactions) for the wellbeing of the TExP and family. This preventor identity could potentially be synonymized with a ‘managerial’ role, one in which the TExP spouse carefully manages all aspects of the environment to prevent any negative outcomes. M expressed this identity experience well in utilizing the metaphor of being an octopus, “so I labelled this “the octopus mode”. So you’ve got all these legs, and you’re trying to keep everything super steady and stable because ya know, you have to make sure there’s no ripples”. The preventor need not replace the concept of protector, but perhaps speaks to the multifaceted challenges inherent in navigating identity as a ‘spouse-of’ a TExP.

Yambo et al. (2016) do speak to the concept of ‘maintaining the peace’ (p. 547), or ‘becoming the peacemaker’, and although the ‘preventor’ and the ‘peacemaker’ may initially appear to be semantically the same or similar, the role embodied by a ‘peacemaker’ constitutes different behavioural enactments than that of ‘preventor’. Conceptually, to be a ‘peacemaker’, one must actively step between two conflictual parties (stepping into a ‘warzone’ so to speak), seeking to settle an active dispute between two parties to attain a level of safety/peace, between warring factions. Although this certainly may occur in the households of TExP’s and their spouses, the title of ‘peacemaker’ would appear to represent the unfolding of a different role than that of preventor as described above. Additionally, Yambo and colleagues utilize this

peacemaker label to express the ways in which their participants sought to educate and inform their children of the TEXP's diagnosis, in the hopes of cultivating the children's understanding of the TEXP's medical condition, and thus from where their spouse's behaviours were arising. Given Yambo et al.'s description of the 'peacemaker' identity and the participant quote that provided to support this finding, it could be argued that the identity label of 'preventor' may have more accurately described the participants' experiences of carefully arranging and preempting any negative emotional consequence for the TEXP. However, the Yambo article remains somewhat unclear as to the specifics of what 'peacemaking' entailed for participants and thus it is difficult to ascertain how accurately the emergent identity of 'preventor' might apply to the Yambo study's participants' experiences.

Interestingly, some participants in the current study reported that, in the long run, becoming the preventor served to delay the progress of healing for the TEXP. For example, M.B reported that this delay likely prolonged the experiences of dysregulation in the household, rather than providing a means for healing for the TEXP. M.B states:

“It is through getting triggered that he can bring it up in psychotherapy and go “this happened, blah blah, about the laundry, my wife is so irresponsible, for the keys, for the whatever” and for the psychologist to go, “that’s really interesting. What did that activate?” And then they go down to the root and then they fix the root. But if I’m not, if I’ve become the magician octopus, who can always make the laundry right and the keys right, then what happens? He doesn’t get triggered. But like the first second he’ll step out of the house, boom his world’s gonna explode. So the shift I had was, it went from “I have to make sure I make no ripples, and I have to avoid all ripples, and I have to be really really good” – so that’s when octopus got developed – to “fu*k that [...]. So, it shifted from “as a spouse I need to make my husband happy” to “as a spouse I am the channel to his growth and recovery and healing”

Many participants in the current study reported that becoming the 'preventor' was a steppingstone in their navigation of identity; participants shared their progressions from solely embodying the 'preventor' identity to realizing that their identity as a spouse needed to be more

than one of careful ‘avoidance maneuvering’ and realizing that they did not hold the ultimate responsibility of the TExp’s sense of peace and calm. Burk and Reitzes (2016) speak to identity being a social product, symbolic of the roles and behaviours facilitated and reinforced by the feedback received by the individual and this ‘preventor’ identity is one that was reinforced continually as spouses experienced the positive effects that their careful planning and preemptive ‘neutralization-gymnastics’, where they were often able to prevent, or at the very least soften, the occurrence of trauma behaviours/symptomology of the TExp. Hence, while the uptake of the ‘preventor’ identity is one that is unsurprising, it appears to be a unique contribution of the current study’s exploration of understanding identity navigation amongst TExp spouses.

The ‘preventor’ identity provides an interesting commentary on the potential effects of identity-laden professions, in which the spouse is seen as an extension of the active member and is – either implicitly or explicitly – identified as an indispensable support in the TExp’s wellbeing (Landers et al., 2020; Porter & Henrikson, 2016). In military contexts, Park (2011) speaks to spousal and family identity, stating the common understanding that “when one person joins, the whole family serves” (p. 65). In considering the results of the current study (i.e., that TExp spouses can actively embody the preventor identity to proactively manage their environments), investigation into the correlation between this encouraged spousal-indispensability and the ‘preventor’ identity assumed by spouses might be of further interest for future researchers to consider and will be discussed in the Future Research section of this paper.

Implications for Counselling

Holding an understanding of self in the various ways that it identifies, locating the ways in which one attaches meaning and purpose to how they relate to the world around them is

known to be foundational to psychological wellbeing (Jourard, 1965; Lecky, 1945; Maslow, 1954; Rogers, 1951). As such, insight into the mechanisms through which TExP's spouses navigate their identities is potentially valuable as it illuminates possible avenues to support the wellbeing of this population. Existing research that discusses coping strategies, as well as research that names the experiences of caregiver burden and secondary traumatic stress, is a vital piece of the puzzle towards supporting TExP spousal wellbeing; the current research contributes uniquely to this puzzle by providing insight into the ways in which TExP spouses navigate their identities.

Gaining insight into the ways in which TExP spouses navigate their identities might be likened to a cultural competency of sorts, wherein practitioners hold a general understanding of what TExP spouses may be experiencing in their contexts and what they may need to navigate such spaces in more grounded and fulfilling ways. Counsellors and mental health practitioners may gain a clearer perspective on the challenges of navigating identity in these contexts and, therefore, provide language and space to explore such concepts with clients and communities more broadly. The current study provides some added clarity around the benefit of asking questions regarding identity navigation with TExP spouses and the possible experiences from which much can be learned by researchers.

The lived experiences shared in this study reveal the importance of encouraging spouses of TExPs to find spaces in which different facets of identity can be explored and engaged. Seeking out spaces that foster the growth of different parts of their being and that celebrate a unique identity or place that they hold was validated as a foundational element of wellbeing and sense of groundedness. Support groups and peer groups can be valuable (Brady et al., 2019; Brodie & Eppler, 2012; Karaffa et al., 2015; Roth & Moore, 2009; Shakespear-Finch et al.,

2002), but also valuable might be finding a space where one can identify as something different than a 'spouse-of'. Although counsellors need not presume that all TExP spouses require a separate space, it offers something to explore with clients and communities, an opportunity for conversation. Further, understanding the propensity of TExP spouses to diminish identity, to place needs on the backburner and make oneself smaller for the betterment of the family - and the resultant potential consequences of such diminishment - is important information to hold as a professional in recognizing possible patterns and for finding avenues to encourage wellness and moments of respite from and within these assumed and often limited roles.

Noting potential patterns of the embodiments of protector and preventor identities, being able to name and validate these experiences, could also be a useful tool in helping TExP spouses recognize their own identities within such contexts. Having language to name some of the potential identity navigation experiences may open up greater space for these conversations in counselling and other helping fields with these spouses. For counselors entering the field, or for counsellors just beginning to or contemplating working with TExP spouses, knowing these are possible ways that this population may be navigating their identities could be valuable insight for encouraging best practices and culturally responsive interventions.

Strengths and Limitations of the Research

The current study possesses several strengths, one of which is the method-question fit. As mentioned in Chapter 3 - Methodology, compatibility between methodology and the domain from which the data is derived is of utmost important for sound research. Utilizing a qualitative, narrative-interview style approach to the apprehension of the data in this study ensured that the quality of data gathered was appropriate, fulsome, and contained personally meaningful experiences for participants. The current study sought to explore the reported experiences of

TExP spouses in their navigation of identity and accomplished this through the chosen methodology, engaging in interviews wherein participants were given the space to share these experiences. Despite a small sample size, the trauma-exposed professions with which the participants were in relationship encompassed three separate professions, including the RCMP, firefighters, and emergency medical responders, representing a diversity of experience. Although the common categorization of ‘TExP’s’ has not previously been established in the literature, the diversity of professions helps provide support for the ways in which the identity navigation experience of spouses of TExPs can be similar across the various trauma-exposed professions. Lastly, the themes presented in this study are clearly supported by the direct quotes provided and endorsed by the current study’s participants.

Due to the time limitations of a thesis, recruiting more participants was not viable. All participants in this study identified as white, cis females, engaged in heterosexual partnerships, and, thus, did not necessarily represent the diversity and intersectionality of identities encapsulated within the population of TExP spouses. The findings discussed in this study may have strong correlations to the literature on gender-roles and gender-socialization considering the homogeneity of participants’ gender identities. Delineating the separation of gendered expectations/socialized gender-roles from being a ‘spouse-of’ in conversations of identity navigation within this population is difficult to do because of this homogeneity, yet worth noting as a possible influencing or grounding factor in the identity navigation process described herein. This study also took place in Canada, within a Westernized context and does not necessarily speak to the cultural diversity that may factor into these experiences.

Reflections as the Researcher

Examining the ways in which this study impacted myself as a researcher is important in qualitative research, as the process and methodology were relational and reflexive in nature and required intentionality and transparency. As expressed in the ‘positionality’ section of this paper, I approached the research from my own lived experience as a TExP spouse’s child, witness to the ways my mother navigated the complexity of her identity as a TExP spouse. Sharing this authentically with participants, when it presented as relevant, provided opportunities to create a shared space that was dialogic and authentic and allowed for lived experience to be shared and meaning to be created in the dyadic encounter of knower and would-be-knower.

Anecdotally, many participants shared the impact that this inquiry had on them as it demonstrated that there was interest ‘out there’ in their stories and that their identity mattered enough to be researched. As a researcher, knowing and feeling that the research carried meaning and purpose, that being curious about participants’ stories as they related to the research question mattered to the participants, brought the research to life, and invigorated the process for me personally.

I was unaware at the onset how challenging the topic of identity navigation would be to explore with participants. The nuance between ‘doing’ (behaviours) and ‘being’ (identity) can be very difficult to grasp and define and proved challenging in the data analysis stage, especially when attempting to identify what truly spoke to the specifics of the research question, versus what was interesting and important, yet not relevant to the study itself. I’ve learned how challenging it can be to dance the relational dance of qualitative inquiry and narrative interviews, while maintaining researcher integrity in having a focused interest on guiding interviews so that the research question remains the focus. What emerged as especially exciting is the implications

that these findings have on counselling practice, as well as the areas that may be relevant for future research directions.

Future research directions

Although there is no direct evidence in this study to support a clear TExP spousal transformational-model for the navigation of identity, there was an interesting commonality amongst participants' lived experiences that suggested the possibility of a common trajectory through which they navigated their identities. Participants shared their maturation through the process of identity navigation, showcasing the possibility of an emergent progression through various stages. This trajectory seemed to include the initial diminishment of self and embodiment of the preventor role, followed by an increasing realization of one's own needs and the ways that may feed this growing sense of identity. Many participants subsequently commented on the fact that after they recognised their own needs as vitally important, they were better equipped make meaning of their experience and seek ways to support others in the journey of being a TExP spouse.

Research that engages with the lived experiences of TExP spouses at different stages of their journey (e.g., number of years as a TExP spouse, interviewing people from various stages) could provide some valuable findings into this possibility of an identity-transformational model for TExP spouses. Research that continues to ask identity-based questions of TExP spouses can potentially contribute in a meaningful way to the field and foster more nuanced discussions on how to support the navigation of personal identity with this population. Approaching the TExP spouse population from the assumption of their personal agency within their identity navigation, may further support this area of research into supporting identity and, subsequently, wellbeing.

As mentioned in the discussion of the theme “I became the preventor”, as spouses seek to ‘serve’ the trauma-exposed profession in their own capacity, recognized by the collective professional bodies (seen most strongly in military and law enforcement organizations) as a valuable member of the TExP’s ‘team’ (Dekel et al., 2018), it stands to reason that this may be a catalyst for the ‘preventor’ identity. Future research in this area could be valuable for the ways in which various professions present the family support role and how to navigate this role in a balanced manner that acknowledges the nuanced impact this may have on TExP spouses’ personal identities. Additionally, although the considerations inherent in trauma treatment and recovery are beyond the scope of this research endeavor, considering what is known regarding trauma treatment – that avoidance of triggering stimuli is contraindicated in an effective healing trajectory (Herman, 1992) – investigation into the ways in which the ‘preventor’ identity assumed by TExP spouses might interfere with/impact the healing trajectory of the TExPs impacted by trauma would potentially benefit the field.

Considering the potential links between the results of this study and existing literature on gender roles and socialized ‘norms’ in relational dynamics, conducting a study that seeks to parse out identity navigation mechanisms of ‘women’ in heterosexual relationships versus women with TExPs as their spouse would be of interest, further clarifying the mechanisms that are inherent as a female spouse versus the identity mechanisms that show up as a result of being connected to a TExP.

Lastly, as mentioned above, the homogeneity of the gender identity of participants, as well as their participation in heterosexual intimate partnerships, restricted the lens through which identity navigation was relayed in this study. Future research would benefit from an intentional inclusion of diverse gender identities and sexualities, amplifying the voices of these

intersectional experiences to examine the influence of socialization and gender roles on the mechanisms of identity within the ‘spouse-of’ experience.

Suggestions for Improving the Study

Having now completed the research process, hindsight provides illumination for the ways in which this study might be approached differently in the future. Considering the challenges inherent within conversations of identity navigation, delineating between ‘doing’ and being’ during the interviews (and the relationship between these two states), framing this distinction in a clearer way to focus these conversations on identity navigation for participants, may have proved useful while completing the interview process. One can ‘do’ something (engage in certain behaviours) without that behaviour becoming an indication of identity (e.g., one can enjoy baking yet not identify oneself as a ‘baker’, similarly one might go through the motions of attending a TExP support group without this engagement actively impacting their identity). ‘Navigating’ is inherently an action word, denoting an agentic movement, and since I now have an even greater understanding of the challenges of speaking to this agentic process within the TExP spousal population, it would have been helpful to perhaps have a preamble, wherein I defined what ‘navigating’ identity implied within the research question. Commenting on one’s ‘self that identifies’ is difficult to do, as our ‘selves’ are continually in motion, changing, dynamic, and experiencing, so presenting participants with a clear definition of what this research sought to explore within identity ‘navigation’ would have proved useful for all parties.

Finding ways to engage a greater diversity of participants, and having time to send out the research poster farther afield, might also have allowed for a greater diversity of intersectionality within the identity navigation conversations in this research.

Final Reflections

The current study intended to investigate the experience of identity navigation amongst spouses of Trauma Exposed Professionals, exploring the ways in which this population navigates personal identities beyond the ‘spouse-of’ identity. Using narrative-styled interviews, participants engaged in a dialogic encounter with the researcher in which their reported experiences were conveyed, and an understanding of the information conveyed was collaboratively co-constructed. Following the interviews, using Thematic Analysis, six themes were co-constructed and, subsequently, endorsed by participants. These themes presented in Chapter 4 and Discussed in Chapter 5 delineate the ways in which this research might impact the field and counseling practice and possible ways that future research might elaborate on these findings. The navigation of identity amongst spouses of TExPs is a complex and multifaceted experience; the importance of investigating and recognizing the mechanisms through which these identity experiences are navigated is important in illuminating how this population might be better seen, understood, and further supported.

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