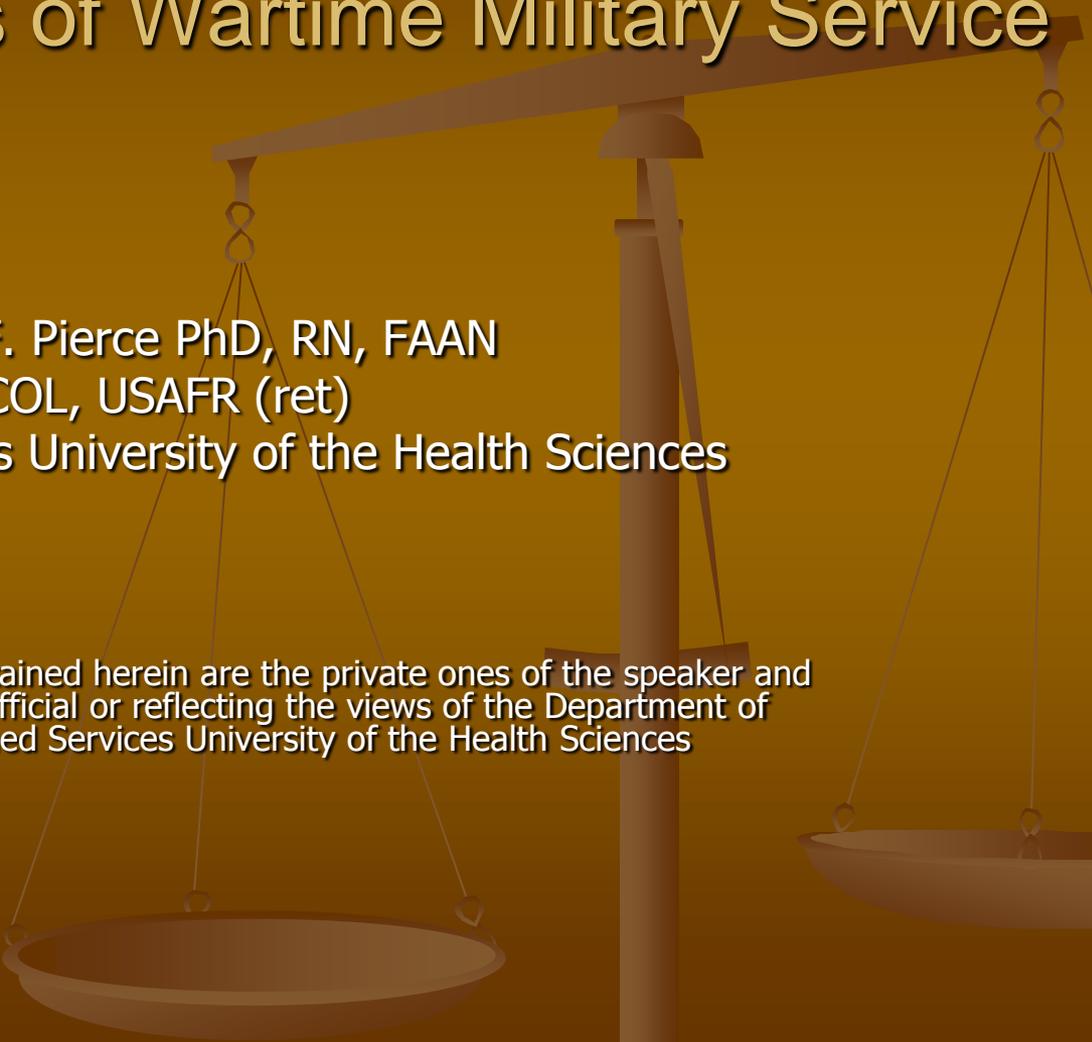# Balancing Stress and Resources to Cope

with the Demands of Wartime Military Service

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Purpose

- Seeking a more comprehensive picture of war-related stress
  - Examining multiple sources of stress
  - Multiple outcomes of the combined sources of stress
- Our prior work suggests that war-related and life stressors result in PTSD and depression, and in turn, are related to poorer physical health and poorer functioning

Testing Conservation of Resources (COR) Theory

Individuals "*strive to obtain, retain, foster and protect those things they centrally value*"

Hobfoll, 2011, p. 117

COR Theory

- **Traumatic stress** is characterized by a rapid loss of psychosocial and material resources, whereas **job-related demands** often result in a slow drain of resources

- For military members, traumatic and job-related stressors combine to result in a depleted pool of resources that both are a cause of these stress outcomes, and further undermine the ability to resist stressful demands, as the very resources they would call upon are depleted

- It is the preservation of these same resources that are the building-blocks of resilience

Resource Gain vs. Resource Loss

- Resource gains contribute to vigor and engagement

- Resource gains have markedly weaker impact than resource losses

- Theory posits that **resource loss** is the main cause of the negative sequelae of stressful conditions, including psychological distress, negative health outcomes, and diminished functioning
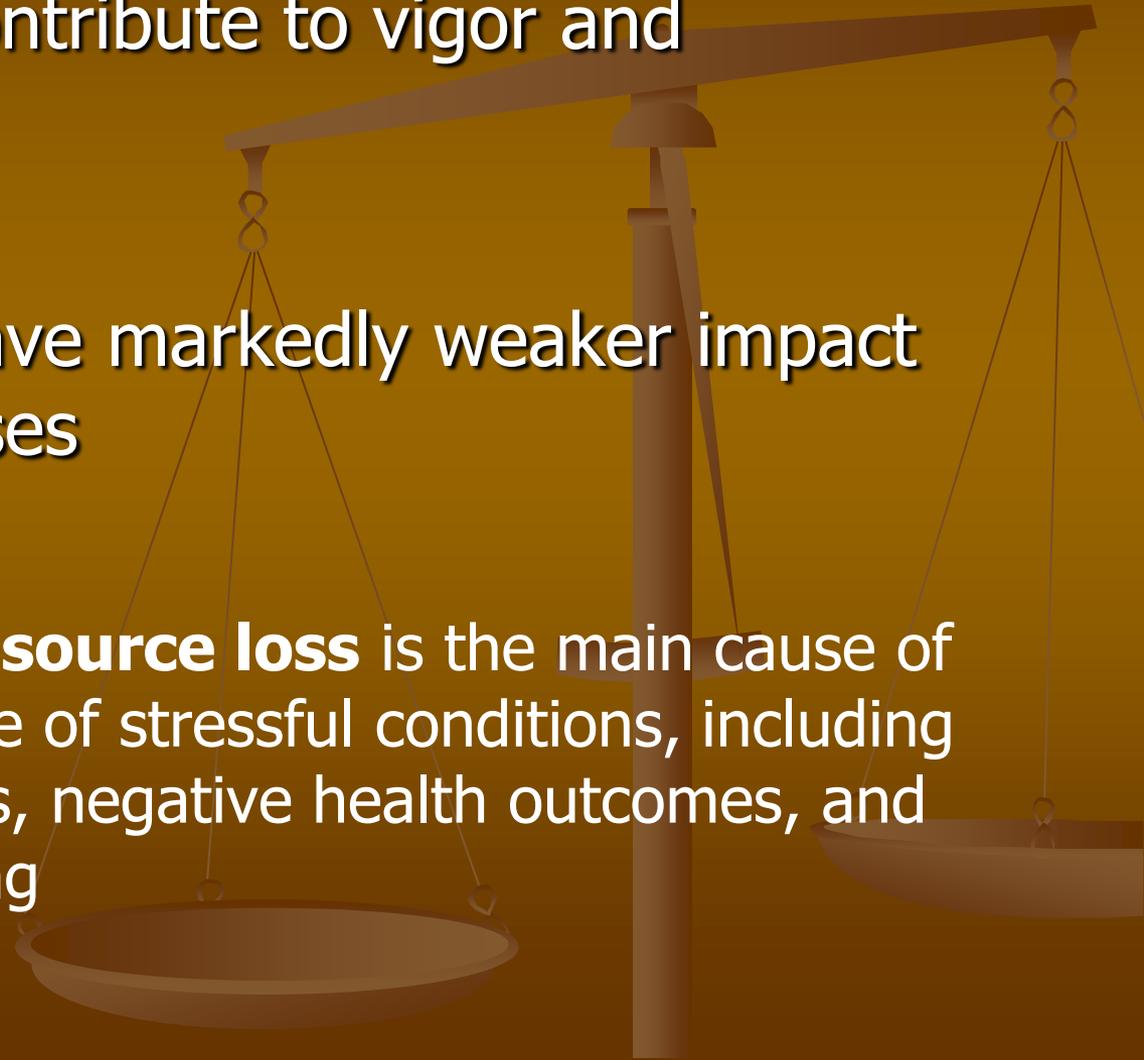
Method

Sample

- Probability sample of 2,250 Air Force personnel contacted at 2-time points deployed between Oct 2001 and Sept 2004
  - Randomly selected by component, deployment, and gender
  - Time 1 1,009
  - Time 2 796 [sample used for this analysis]

Measures at Time 1

- Stressors
  - Exposure to trauma
  - Job strain
  - Financial strain
  - Work-family conflict
  - Deployment length

- Loss & gains of resources

Proximal outcomes assessed at Time 2

12 months later

N=796

- Proximal outcomes
  - Symptoms of PTSD
  - Depressive Symptoms
- Distal Outcomes
  - Perceived health
  - Role and emotional functioning

Hypothesis 1

- We predicted that the family, occupation, and traumatic sources of stress would combine to directly impact multiple outcomes (PTSD symptoms, depressive symptoms, perceived physical health & functioning)

Hypothesis 2

- Resource loss and gain would also significantly mediate the impact of these sources of stress on the multiple outcomes, but they could also have direct effects
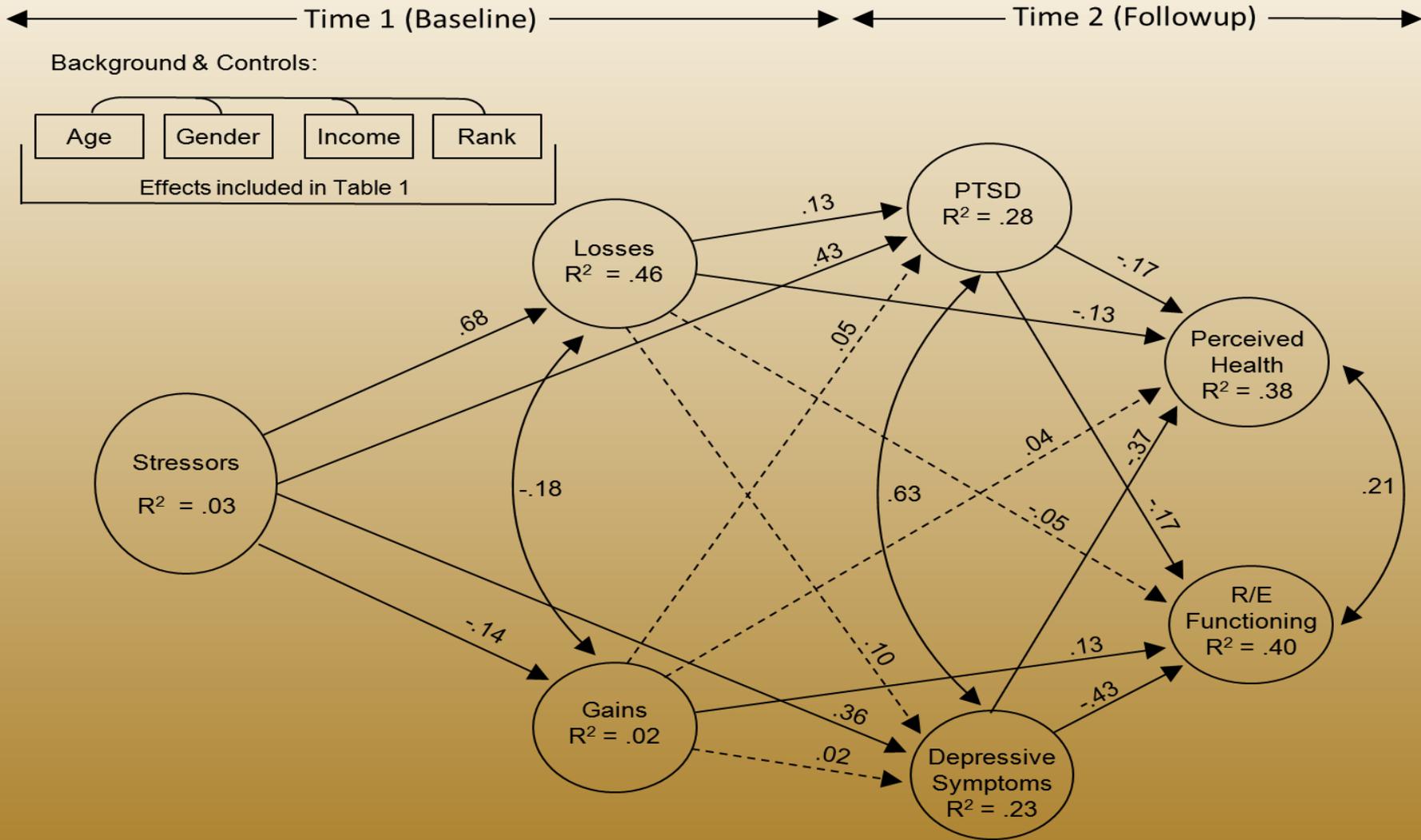
Hypothesis 3

- Those who experience greater PTSD and depression symptoms would also experience diminished physical health and poorer functioning

Hypothesis 4

- The impact of war-related, family and job stressors would be mediated through the **loss** pathways to a greater extent than the **gain** pathways

Structural Equation Modeling Analyses

Figure 1. Longitudinal effects (standardized coefficients) of stressors, resource losses and gains on mental health and functioning outcomes. Stressors include job strain, financial strain, exposure to trauma, length of deployment, and work-family conflict. All solid paths or correlations are statistically significant at .05. Curved lines represent correlations between residuals. $\chi 2$ (180, n = 758) = 311.44. TLI, CFI = .99, .99; SRMR = .03; RMSEA = .031.

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Results were consistent with proposed model

- Greater stressors were predictive of greater resource loss and diminished resource gains
- Stressors predict higher PTSD and depression symptoms
- In turn, resource losses predict higher levels of PTSD and lower levels of perceived health

- Resource gains predicted higher role and emotional functioning

- Both PTSD and depressive symptoms each predicted lower perceived health

Testing the COR Model

- Results support COR theory's emphasis on the primacy of resource loss

- Resource loss is a more powerful predictor than resource gain of the impact of war stressors on PTSD, depressive symptoms and perceived health given its direct & indirect effects

- Resource gains had a stronger direct impact on functioning than resource losses

- A lack of resources are important predictors of psychological distress

- Resource gains are little affected by stressors

Thoughts for potential interventions

- PTSD symptoms are not only driven by traumatic exposure
  - Symptoms are also related to more general stressors in peoples' lives compromising personal and interpersonal resilience

  - Important to consider multiple aspects of military members and their families' lives that contribute in unique ways along the path of recovery from wartime service
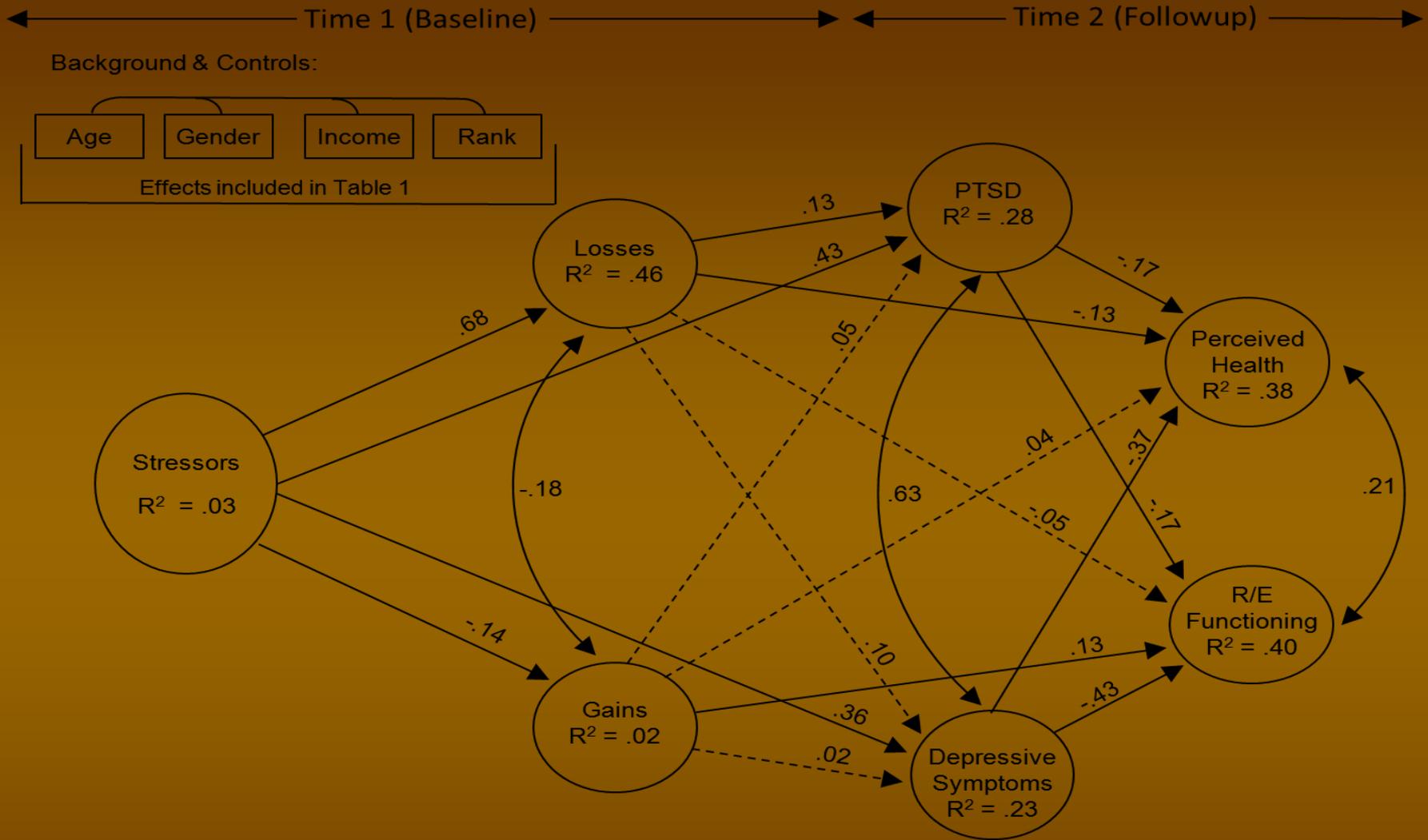
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Policy Implications

It is more effective to limit resource loss cycles than promoting gain cycles

Acknowledgement