



Experiences of Military Couples During Reintegration Following Deployment

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Background

The transition from deployment to reintegration is a challenging time for military families. Although service members and their romantic partners are at greater risk for depression and relationship distress during the transition, some military couples are able to thrive in the midst of the upheaval. The goal of our project was to document the communication patterns that are satisfying and dissatisfying for military families during the three months following reunion after deployment.

Research Design

We conducted a longitudinal study to identify the communication issues and challenges that arise during the reintegration phase. Data collection took place from November 2010 to August 2011. Couples who participated in the study met the following criteria:

- they were in a romantic relationship,
- they or their romantic partner had returned home from deployment in the past 30 days,
- they were custodial parents of one or more children,
- partners had separate email accounts, and
- both partners were willing to participate.

The research design was a three-phase, self-report study. Upon enrolling in the investigation, each partner received a unique login and password to access an online questionnaire once per month for three consecutive months following reunion. Individuals completed measures assessing their romantic relationship, their communication behaviors, their parenting strategies, and the well-being of their oldest child.

Sample

Participants were 236 individuals living in 21 states who were part of 118 romantic couples ($n = 118$ males, 118 females). They ranged from 21 to 63 years of age ($M = 33.03$ years, $SD = 6.84$ years). Most couples were married (98%); others were seriously dating (1%) or engaged to be married (1%). Approximately 24% were dual-career military couples. Their romantic relationships averaged 9.01 years in length ($SD = 5.67$ years).

Military personnel were affiliated with the U.S. Army (57%), Army National Guard (21%), Air National Guard (13%), Air Force (6%), and Marines (3%). Their primary mission during their deployment was combat (78%), peacekeeping (10%), or other (12%). Their deployment lasted an average of 9.67 months ($SD = 3.86$ months). Approximately 32% were returning from their first deployment, 26% were returning from their second deployment, 19% were returning from their third deployment, 8% were returning from their fourth deployment, and 15% had completed five or more deployments. Couples had been reunited an average of 16.94 days ($SD = 8.74$ days) when they began the study.

Noteworthy Findings

Preliminary results demonstrated that individuals were less satisfied with their romantic relationship (a) when they were experiencing uncertainty about their romantic relationship, (b) when their romantic partner was interfering with their everyday routines, and (c) when they avoided talking with their romantic partner about time spent apart during the deployment. Similarly, participants reported that their oldest child had more difficulties during the transition (a) when parents were experiencing uncertainty about their romantic relationship, (b) when parents were interfering with each other's daily routines, and (c) when parents avoided talking with their romantic partner about time spent apart during deployment.

Related Work in Progress

Our team also is working on a study examining the challenges and opportunities facing military youth when a parent is deployed. In July 2011, we conducted in-depth interviews with 34 military youth between the ages of 10 and 13. Children identified a variety of negative and positive outcomes of a parent's deployment. Challenges included (a) missing the deployed family member, (b) being responsible for more household tasks, (c) having trouble maintaining positive relationships with siblings and the at-home parent, (d) dealing with emotional issues, and (e) problems managing daily routines. Positive outcomes from deployment included (a) being well-prepared for future deployments, (b) becoming more self-sufficient, (c) having new or unique experiences as part of a military family, and (d) building family cohesion.

Recommendations for Families

Our findings, taken together, suggest two guidelines for returning service members and their romantic partners who want to promote family well-being across the deployment cycle. First, military couples should take steps to reduce uncertainty about their relationship and to diminish interference from their partner. Second, military families should proactively help their children to manage the increased responsibilities and intense emotions that arise during deployment.

Future Research

The next step is to track military families over time across the full cycle of deployment. Accordingly, we will seek grant funding to launch a study that follows families before, during, and after deployment.

We welcome any feedback you have about our study, our work in progress, or our next steps in this line of research. Please contact Dr. Leanne Knobloch at knobl@illinois.edu.