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TITLE: **Reintegration Difficulty of Military Couples Following Deployment**

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CONTRACTING ORGANIZATION: **University of Illinois  
Champaign, IL 61820**

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<b>14. ABSTRACT</b>  The reentry of service members back into family life after deployment can be extremely challenging for military couples. Understanding the factors that contribute to the reintegration difficulty of returning service members and at-home partners is essential for attracting, retaining, and safeguarding the nation's best military personnel. The <i>goal of this project</i> is to evaluate how people's mental health symptoms and romantic relationship characteristics predict their difficulty with reintegration.  The <i>research design</i> is an 8-wave longitudinal study in which 250 military couples complete an online survey once per month for eight consecutive months beginning at homecoming (4,000 total observations). Military couples are eligible to participate if (a) individuals are involved in a romantic relationship, and (b) both partners complete the Wave 1 survey during the first week after reunion following deployment. We will use the data to generate research-based guidelines for reintegration.					
<b>15. SUBJECT TERMS</b> reintegration difficulty; military couples; mental health; anxiety; depression; posttraumatic stress; relationship satisfaction; relational turbulence					
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***Reintegration Difficulty of Military Couples Following Deployment***  
***Knobloch (PI) & Knobloch-Fedders (Co-I)***

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## **1. Introduction**

The reentry of service members back into family life after deployment can be extremely challenging for military couples. Understanding the factors that contribute to the reintegration difficulty of returning service members and at-home partners is essential for attracting, retaining, and safeguarding the nation's best military personnel. The *goal of this project* is to evaluate how people's mental health symptoms and romantic relationship characteristics predict their difficulty with reintegration. The *research design* is an 8-wave longitudinal study in which 250 military couples complete an online survey once per month for eight consecutive months beginning at homecoming. We will use the data to generate research-based guidelines for reintegration.

## **2. Keywords**

reintegration difficulty; military couples; mental health; anxiety; depression; posttraumatic stress; relationship satisfaction; relational turbulence

## **3. Accomplishments**

### **Major Goals of the Project**

#### *Year 1 Goals – Preparation for Data Collection*

1. Seek IRB approval for Study 1 (completed 12 March 2014).
2. Solicit military family life contacts for advertising (began 15 April 2014, completed 7 November 2014).

#### *Year 2 and Year 3 Goals – Recruitment and Data Collection*

1. Identify returning military units (began 15 April 2014, completed 7 November 2014).
2. Advertise through online and newspaper channels (began 15 April 2014, completed 7 November 2014).
3. Enroll military couples for Study 1 (began 15 April 2014, completed 7 November 2014).

### **Accomplishments Under the Goals**

The goal of this project is to evaluate how people's mental health symptoms and romantic relationship characteristics predict their difficulty with reintegration. The research design is an 8-wave longitudinal study in which 250 military couples complete an online survey once per month for eight consecutive months beginning at homecoming (4,000 total observations).

*Year 1 Major Task 1:* Collaborate with consultants to finalize research protocol (completed 5 December 2013).

*Year 1 Major Task 2:* Seek IRB approval from the University of Illinois (approved 3 February 2014), Northwestern University (approved 13 February 2014), and the USAMRMC Office of Research Protections Human Research Protection Office (HRPO; approved 12 March 2014).

*Year 1 Major Task 3:* Upload online surveys (completed 5 December 2013).

*Year 1 Major Task 4:* Identify returning military units (began 15 April 2014, completed 7 November 2014).

*Year 1 Major Task 5:* Solicit military family life contacts for advertising (began 15 April 2014, completed 7 November 2014).

*Year 2 & 3 Major Task 1:* Advertise through online and newspaper channels (completed 7 November 2014).

*Year 2 & 3 Major Task 2:* Continue to identify returning military units (completed 7 November 2014).

*Year 2 & 3 Major Task 3:* Continue to solicit military family life contacts for advertising (completed 7 November 2014).

*Year 2 & 3 Major Task 4:* Manage enrollment, retention, and e-card distribution (completed 7 November 2014).

## **Opportunities for Training and Professional Development**

### *Undergraduate Research Assistant Training*

Under Dr. Knobloch's direction, five undergraduate students earned independent study credit during the 2014-15 academic year by attending weekly team meetings, learning about the research process, and completing basic research tasks. These undergraduate research assistants have helped to (a) circulate recruitment advertisements to state family program directors, family readiness officers, directors of psychological health, chaplains, and other professionals who support military families; (b) post to online forums, message boards, Facebook pages, and social networking sites geared toward military families; (c) identify military units returning from deployment; (d) purchase e-gift cards for distribution; (e) upload monthly e-mails; and (f) track participation and attrition across couples and across waves.

### *Graduate Research Assistant Training*

Under Dr. Knobloch's supervision, four Ph.D. students were employed during the 2014-15 academic year to gain research experience and complete advanced research tasks. The

graduate research assistants have helped to (a) review drafts of the Institutional Review Board materials; (b) conduct literature searches for relevant publications; (c) upload the online surveys into SurveyMonkey; (d) pilot test the survey format and skip logic; (e) help with recruitment; (f) complete daily checks of the survey responses for reports of suicide as required by the University of Illinois Institutional Review Board; (g) clean the incoming data; (h) provide feedback on the quarterly report materials, annual report materials, and annual in-progress review presentation; (i) circulate press releases about the study; and (j) assist in mentoring the undergraduate research assistants.

## **Dissemination of Results**

### *Press Releases on the Study's Launch*

University of Illinois press release (30 July 2014)

[http://news.illinois.edu/news/14/0730military\\_families\\_LeanneKnobloch.html](http://news.illinois.edu/news/14/0730military_families_LeanneKnobloch.html)

Northwestern University press release (8 October 2014)

<http://www.newswise.com/articles/study-of-military-couples-launched>

### *News Coverage of the Study's Launch*

Guest essay by the PI published by militaryspouse.com (8 August 2014)

<http://militaryspouse.com/articles/why-is-reunion-harder-than-it-looks/>

Local TV news interview given by the PI to WCIA 3 Champaign IL (19 August 2014)

News story in the *Fort Campbell Leaf-Chronicle* (30 September 2014)

<http://www.theleafchronicle.com/story/news/local/fort-campbell/2014/09/30/study-seeks-post-deployment-fort-campbell-couples/16469795/>

News story in the *Watertown Daily Times* (9 October 2014)

<http://www.watertowndailytimes.com/article/20141009/OGD/141008378/2591>

News story in the *Fort Hood Herald* (29 October 2014)

[http://kdhnews.com/fort\\_hood\\_herald/across\\_the\\_fort/military-couples-can-participate-in-couples-study/article\\_3bef545e-5f32-11e4-b8aa-0017a43b2370.html](http://kdhnews.com/fort_hood_herald/across_the_fort/military-couples-can-participate-in-couples-study/article_3bef545e-5f32-11e4-b8aa-0017a43b2370.html)

## **Plans for the Next Reporting Period**

*Year 4 Major Task 1:* Clean data in preparation for analyses.

#### **4. Impact**

##### **Impact on Principal Disciplines**

Several researchers funded by the agency have contacted us for advice on advertising and recruitment given our success in attracting participants. We have been happy to share suggestions and best practices.

##### **Impact on Other Disciplines**

Nothing to report.

##### **Impact on Technology Transfer**

Nothing to report.

##### **Impact on Society Beyond Science and Technology**

Nothing to report.

#### **5. Changes/Problems**

##### **Changes in Approach and Reasons for Change**

A strong theme of the in-progress review panel we attended in March 2015 was the capacity of the projects to shed light on how military families hailing from diverse backgrounds converge and/or diverge in their experiences. Whereas our original sample size of 250 military couples would not have permitted us to examine these important issues, a more robust sample size of 500 military couples is better equipped to disentangle cohort differences in the associations among people's mental health symptoms, romantic relationship characteristics, and difficulty with reintegration.

Our recruitment procedures were so successful that we are working to double our sample to take advantage of the many couples who claimed spots in the study in advance of reunion dates occurring in the winter, spring, and summer of 2014-15. Our revised recruitment goal is to collect online survey data from an additional 250 couples once per month for eight consecutive months beginning at homecoming (4,000 additional observations). We submitted a formal request to Mirlene Desir, Grants Specialist, on 3 November 2015 to modify our original statement of work to increase our sample size to 500 couples. We have yet to hear back about a decision. In the meantime, we recognize that we are collecting data from additional couples at our own risk.

##### **Actual or Anticipated Problems or Delays and Actions or Plans to Resolve Them**

Nothing to report.

**Changes that Had a Significant Impact on Expenditures**

Nothing to report.

**Significant Changes in Use or Care of Human Subjects**

Nothing to report.

**6. Products****Publications, Conference Papers, and Presentations**

Knobloch, L. K., & Knobloch-Fedders, L. M. (2015, March). *Reintegration difficulty of military couples after deployment*. Report presented to the Family Research In-Progress Review Panel, Ft. Detrick, MD.

**Websites**

<http://publish.illinois.edu/military-couples-study/> – Study website designed to attract, recruit, and retain participants. Central clearinghouse for press coverage of research and scholarly publications.

<https://www.facebook.com/military.couples.study> - Facebook page for the study.

[https://twitter.com/search?q=study of military couples after deployment/](https://twitter.com/search?q=study+of+military+couples+after+deployment/) - Twitter account for the study.

<https://www.linkedin.com/pub/leanne-knobloch/a4/323/ab9> - LinkedIn account for the study.

**Technologies or Techniques**

Nothing to report.

**Inventions, Patent Applications, and/or Licenses**

Nothing to report.

**Other Products**

Nothing to report.

**Addendum: Publications, Conference Papers, and Presentations from Pilot Data Funded by the University of Illinois**

*Journal Articles Reporting Pilot Data (Funded by the University of Illinois)*

Knobloch, L. K., Pusateri, K. B., Ebata, A. T., & McGlaughlin, P. C. (2014). Communicative experiences of military youth during a parent's return home from deployment. *Journal of Family Communication, 14*, 291-309.

Knobloch, L. K., Pusateri, K. B., Ebata, A. T., & McGlaughlin, P. C. (2015). Experiences of military youth during a family member's deployment: Changes, challenges, and opportunities. *Youth & Society, 47*, 319-342.

*Book Chapters Reporting Pilot Data (Funded by the University of Illinois)*

Knobloch, L. K., & Wehrman, E. C. (2014). Family relationships embedded in U.S. military culture. In C. R. Agnew (Ed.), *Social influences on close relationships: Beyond the dyad* (pp. 58-82). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Knobloch, L. K., & Wilson, S. R. (2015). Communication in military families across the deployment cycle. In L. H. Turner & R. West (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of family communication* (pp. 370-385). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

*Conference Presentations and Papers Reporting Pilot Data (Funded by the University of Illinois)*

Knobloch, L. K. (2014, July). *Conflict management in military families*. Workshop presented to the military parent training group, Military Child Education Coalition National Training Seminar, Washington, DC.

Knobloch, L. K. (2014, October). *Relational turbulence among military families reunited following deployment*. Convocation presentation, Illinois College, Jackson, IL.

Knobloch, L. K., Theiss, J. A., & Wehrman, E. C. (2015, April). *Communication of military couples during deployment: Topic avoidance and relational uncertainty*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Central States Communication Association, Madison, WI. [Top Paper Award, Interpersonal and Small Group Communication Interest Group]

## 7. Participants and Other Collaborating Organizations

### Individuals who Have Worked on the Project

Name	Role	Person Month	Contribution
Leanne Knobloch, Ph.D.	PI	2.8	PI
Lynne Knobloch-Fedders, Ph.D.	Co-I	2.4	Co-I
Bryan Abendschein, M. A.	Graduate RA	0.66	Recruitment and Retention
Erin Basinger, M.A.	Graduate RA	1.22	Recruitment and Retention
Kelly McAninch, M.A.	Graduate RA	1.22	Recruitment and Retention
Erin Wehrman, M.A.	Graduate RA	1.22	Recruitment and Retention
Daniel Byrne	Undergraduate RA ( <i>unpaid</i> )	1.13	Recruitment and E-Gift Cards
Hallie Davis	Undergraduate RA ( <i>unpaid</i> )	0.56	Recruitment and Press Releases
Dale Erdmier	Undergraduate RA ( <i>unpaid</i> )	0.84	Database Management
Laura Saldivar	Undergraduate RA ( <i>unpaid</i> )	0.84	Website and Social Media
Sylvie Zhaung	Undergraduate RA ( <i>unpaid</i> )	1.13	Tracking Returning Units

### Change in Active Other Support of Key Personnel

Nothing to report.

### Partner Organizations

University of Illinois – Urbana, IL

Contributions: (1) financial support (including conference travel), (2) in-kind support (including office supplies, computers, software, printers, Internet access, telephone, and fax), (3) facilities (including office space and meeting rooms), and (4) personnel (including administrative support staff, human resource management, and undergraduate research assistants).

*The Family Institute at Northwestern University* – Evanston, IL

Contributions: (1) in-kind support (including office supplies, computers, software, printers, Internet access, telephone, and fax), (2) facilities (including office space and meeting rooms), and (3) personnel (including administrative support staff, human resource management, and undergraduate research assistants).

**8. Special Reporting Requirements: Quad Chart**

**“Reintegration Difficulty of Military Couples Following Deployment”**

USAMRMC Log No. 12154004



PI: Leanne K. Knobloch

Org: University of Illinois

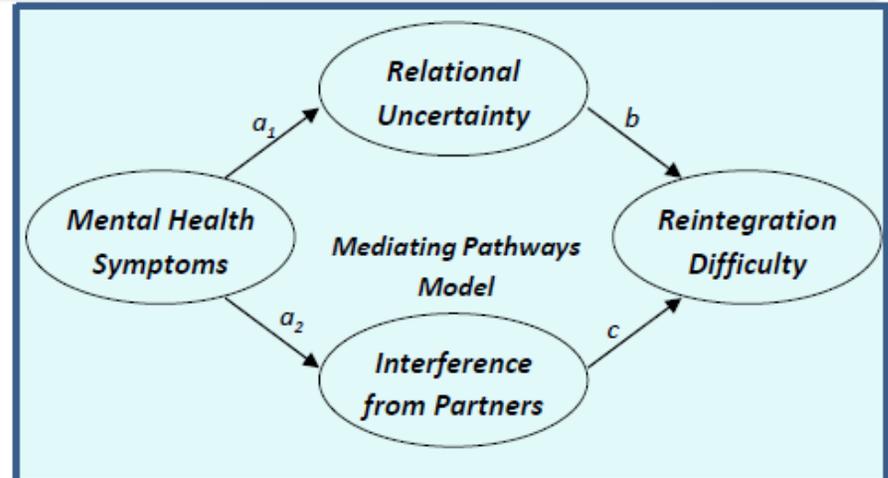
Award Amount: \$834,061

**Study Aims**

- Test the mechanisms of relational turbulence as **independent predictors** of the reintegration difficulty of returning service members and at-home partners.
- Test relational uncertainty and interference from partners as **mediating pathways** linking mental health symptoms to the reintegration difficulty of returning service members and at-home partners.
- Test relational uncertainty and interference from partners as **moderating debilitating factors** of the associations that mental health symptoms share with the reintegration difficulty of returning service members and at-home partners.

**Approach**

This project will evaluate how people’s mental health symptoms and romantic relationship characteristics predict their difficulty with reintegration. Online survey data will be collected from 250 military couples once per month for 8 consecutive months upon reunion.



The goal of this project is to examine how mental health symptoms, relational uncertainty, and interference from partners predict reintegration difficulty following deployment. The mediating pathways model is one of three models to be tested.

**Timeline and Cost**

Activities	Year	1	2	3	4
Preparation for Data Collection		█			
Recruitment & Data Collection		█	█	█	
Data Analysis & Dissemination					█
Estimated Budget (\$K)		210,405	253,895	224,354	145,407

Updated: 011/16/2015

**Study Milestones**

**Year 1 Goals** – Preparation for Data Collection

- Seek IRB approval
- Solicit military family life contacts for advertising (ongoing)

**Year 2 and Year 3 Goals** – Recruitment and Data Collection

- Identify returning military units (ongoing)
- Advertise through online and newspaper channels (ongoing)
- Enroll military couples (ongoing)
- Manage data collection, retention, & e-card distribution (ongoing)

**Year 4 Goals** – Data Analysis and Dissemination

- Analyze data
- Disseminate results
- Identify empirically-based guidelines for clinical application

**Comments/Challenges/Issues/Concerns**

(none yet)

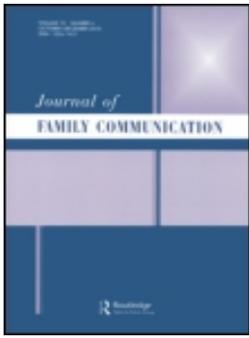
**Budget Expenditure to Date**

Projected Expenditure: \$210,405

Estimated Actual Expenditure: \$360,000

## **9. Appendices**

1. Knobloch, L. K., Pusateri, K. B., Ebata, A. T., & McGlaughlin, P. C. (2014). Communicative experiences of military youth during a parent's return home from deployment. *Journal of Family Communication, 14*, 291-309.
2. Knobloch, L. K., Pusateri, K. B., Ebata, A. T., & McGlaughlin, P. C. (2015). Experiences of military youth during a family member's deployment: Changes, challenges, and opportunities. *Youth & Society, 47*, 319-342.
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4. Knobloch, L. K., & Wilson, S. R. (2015). Communication in military families across the deployment cycle. In L. H. Turner & R. West (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of family communication* (pp. 370-385). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.



## Communicative Experiences of Military Youth During a Parent's Return Home from Deployment

Leanne K. Knobloch, Kimberly B. Pusateri, Aaron T. Ebata & Patricia C. McGlaughlin

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## Communicative Experiences of Military Youth During a Parent's Return Home from Deployment

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The return home of a service member from tour of duty can be stressful for military families (Bowling & Sherman, 2008), but surprisingly little is known about how military youth communicatively experience a parent's homecoming (MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010). This study draws on the *emotional cycle of deployment model* (Pincus, House, Christenson, & Adler, 2001) to examine the reunion period in military youth's own words. Individual interviews were conducted with 31 military youth (age range = 10 to 13 years old). Participants identified four changes to family life (*RQ1*), including spending time together, experiencing emotional tranquility, returning to patterns in place before deployment, and having difficulty reintegrating the service member into everyday routines. Some military youth reported that the reunion matched their expectations (*RQ2*), but others noted that the reunion fell short of their expectations or that they did not expect the returning service member to be so tired or so irritable. Participants also described four issues of uncertainty (*RQ3*), including questions about the service member's activities during deployment, reasons for joining and deploying, family life, and the possibility of future deployments. The article concludes by examining the theoretical and pragmatic implications of the findings.

*The first week that he gets back, it's like – you love him and it's great that he's back, but after that, you just have to get used to him being back, because it's just so difficult to go six months without seeing him, and then every day seeing him.*

— Jermichael, age 11

The deployment of a parent for military service can generate substantial stress for military youth. Indeed, military youth face a myriad of challenges when a service member is away on a tour of duty (Flake, Davis, Johnson, & Middleton, 2009; Lowe, Adams, Browne, & Hinkle, 2012; Sheppard, Malatras, & Israel, 2010), which can result in behavioral problems (Lipari, Winters,

Matos, Smith, & Rock, 2010), diminished academic performance (Engel, Gallagher, & Lyle, 2010), heightened anxiety (Lester et al., 2010), increased stress (Barnes, Davis, & Treiber, 2007), and emotional difficulties (Chandra et al., 2010; Cozza, 2011).

These challenges may emerge, in part, because communicating across the deployment cycle is imbued with uncertainty for military families (e.g., Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008; Joseph & Afifi, 2010; Merolla, 2010). During deployment, military youth may have questions about their loved one's safety, handling new responsibilities, and helping at-home family members (e.g., Houston et al., 2009; Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass, 2007; Orthner & Rose, 2005). Moreover, the uncertainty experienced by military youth does not disappear when the service member returns home. Military youth may be unsure how to get reacquainted, confused by changes to the routines established by the at-home caregiver, and uncertain how to renegotiate chores (e.g., Barker & Berry, 2009; Huebner et al., 2007; Wilson, Wilkum, Chernichky, MacDermid Wadsworth, & Broniarczyk, 2011). In fact, scholars have argued that a service member's reintegration back into family life may be more disruptive to military youth than the initial separation (Huebner et al., 2007; Mmari, Roche, Sudhinaraset, & Blum, 2009).

Despite repeated calls for research in this area (American Psychological Association, 2007; Department of Defense Task Force on Mental Health, 2007), studies of how military youth communicate across the deployment cycle as a whole, and during the reunion period in particular, are remarkably rare (MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010; Park, 2011). Our study advances the literature by examining the communicative experiences of military youth upon a parent's return home from deployment. The warrant for our investigation lies in addressing four gaps in scholarship on communication within military families. First, our study gives voice to the perspectives of military youth in their own words, which is sorely needed both in work on military families (e.g., Chandra, Burns, Tanielian, & Jaycox, 2011; Ternus, 2010) and in the field of family communication more generally (Socha & Yingling, 2010). Second, our study answers calls for theory-driven research on how military youth think, feel, and communicate upon reunion (e.g., Park, 2011). It also marks a major expansion in the literature by illuminating the communicative obstacles and opportunities that military youth navigate when a parent returns home from deployment (e.g., MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010; Mmari et al., 2009; Park, 2011). Fourth, it has pragmatic value by informing guidelines to help parents, teachers, and practitioners communicate effectively with military youth who are negotiating a service member's homecoming (e.g., Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Hardaway, 2004).

The goal of our study is to identify how military youth describe their communicative experiences during a parent's return home from deployment. To that end, we employ the *emotional cycle of deployment model* (Pincus, House, Christenson, & Adler, 2001) to frame a qualitative investigation of how military youth make sense of a parent's postdeployment reintegration into family life. We target early adolescents ranging in age from 10 to 13 years old for a trio of reasons. First, early adolescents face unique stressors across the deployment cycle due to the developmental challenges of building proficiency in interpersonal interaction and acquiring a unique self-concept (e.g., Fitzsimons & Krause-Parello, 2009; Pincus et al., 2001). Second, early adolescence is filled with several changes – including the shift from elementary school to middle school and the onset of puberty – that coalesce with the emotional cycle of deployment model's emphasis on transitions as pivotal moments within military families (e.g., Pincus et al., 2001). Finally, helping military youth thrive during early adolescence is vital for enhancing their future growth: Not only is early adolescence a high-risk period for the emergence of psychopathology

(e.g., Cicchetti & Toth, 1998; Karevold, Røysamb, Ystrom, & Mathiesen, 2009), but it also is a time when family functioning plays a key role in school performance (e.g., Duchesne & Larose, 2007; Johnson, 2010). Our project attends to early adolescent military youth ages 10 to 13 years old for all three reasons.

## THE EMOTIONAL CYCLE OF DEPLOYMENT MODEL

The emotional cycle of deployment model characterizes a tour of duty as a multi-stage process that poses unique challenges for military families at specific points in the trajectory (Pincus et al., 2001; see also Morse, 2006). The model delineates five stages in the deployment cycle. *Predeployment*, which begins when the service member receives deployment orders, involves preparing for departure. Military families commonly experience emotions such as denial, anger, and anticipation of loss. *Deployment* entails the one-month period following departure, during which military families are faced with the tasks of constructing long-distance communication patterns and managing feelings of anxiety and disorientation. During *sustainment*, military families build new routines, identify additional sources of support, and cultivate autonomy. Military youth may be irritable, sad, or in need of extra attention, particularly during special occasions such as birthdays and holidays. *Redeployment* is defined as the one-month period before the service member returns home. It is a stage marked by excitement, anticipation, mounting expectations, and apprehension.

*Postdeployment*, the stage relevant to our investigation, begins with homecoming and is projected to last up to six months following reunion. Often this phase is characterized by an initial honeymoon period of family harmony, but tension may emerge as household routines are altered once more to incorporate the returning service member. Military families grapple with the communicative tasks of redefining roles, reintegrating the service member back into domestic life, managing the loss of autonomy, fostering intimacy, and creating shared meaning about their time apart (Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Knobloch & Theiss, 2011, 2012; Sahlstein, Maguire, & Timmerman, 2009). Common emotions include joy, relief, and awkwardness, but disappointment over violated expectations also may arise (Laser & Stephens, 2011; Wiens & Boss, 2006; Wood, Scarville, & Gravino, 1995). Military youth are quite resilient across the deployment cycle (Lester et al., 2010; Orthner & Rose, 2005; Park, 2011), but they are likely to experience uncertainty when the service member is reinserted into the family system (Huebner et al., 2007).

The emotional cycle of deployment model is based on extensive clinical observation and is well-known in the military family literature, but it has not been the target of much empirical investigation (MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010; Park, 2011). It does, however, provide a conceptual framework for delineating three focal concepts that may be pivotal to how military youth communicate during reintegration: (a) change, (b) expectations for reunion, and (c) uncertainty. Perhaps not coincidentally, all three constructs cohere with seminal theorizing in the field of communication.

*Change* is a first focal concept implied by the emotional cycle of deployment model (Pincus et al., 2001) and prominent in theories of communication that consider the dynamics of relationship development (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Solomon, Weber, & Steuber, 2010; Werner & Baxter, 1994). Military youth are likely to experience marked change when a service member arrives home (e.g., Morse, 2006; Pincus et al., 2001). Scholars have speculated that military youth

may encounter shifts in everyday activities, household chores, and disciplinary patterns as they adjust to life with the service member (e.g., Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Huebner et al., 2007; Mmari et al., 2009). Although conjecture exists in the literature, a thorough description of the changes notable to military youth is lacking. Hence, we offer a first research question:

*RQ1:* What changes to family life, if any, do military youth report experiencing during a parent's homecoming from deployment?

The emotional cycle of deployment model also implies that *expectations for reunion* play an important role in how military youth make sense of reintegration (Morse, 2006; Pincus et al., 2001). Expectations are central to communication theory as well, particularly frameworks contending that people may have difficulty interpreting messages when their expectations for behavior are violated (Afifi & Metts, 1998; Burgoon, 1993; Burgoon & Hale, 1988). Accordingly, military youth may experience upheaval during homecoming if their expectations for reunion do not match their actual experiences. Little is known, however, about the ways in which the postdeployment transition is consistent and inconsistent with military youth's expectations. Scholars have reasoned that military families may feel disillusioned if they envision a homecoming filled with excitement, exuberance, and elation (e.g., Wiens & Boss, 2006; Wood et al., 1995), but the literature needs a formal investigation of how the reunion period may confirm and/or contradict military youth's expectations. Accordingly, we submit a second research question:

*RQ2:* In what ways, if any, do military youth report that their experiences during reunion are compatible and incompatible with their expectations?

Finally, the emotional cycle of deployment model hints that *uncertainty* may be an inherent part of military youth's adjustment during reunion (Pincus et al., 2001). Scholars of communication have long argued that uncertainty arises when people are unsure about social interaction, have difficulty predicting and explaining their environment, and lack information about their surroundings (e.g., Afifi & Morse, 2009; Berger & Bradac, 1982; Brashers, 2007). According to the emotional cycle of deployment model, essential communicative tasks for military families during reintegration are getting reacquainted and relearning family dynamics (Pincus et al., 2001). We are not aware of any research that has directly examined the issues of uncertainty that military youth grapple with during reunion, but recent findings imply that they may encounter questions about how to adjust to the parenting style of the returning service member, how to quell fears about subsequent separations, and how to convey the ways they have matured during the time apart (e.g., Barker & Berry, 2009; Huebner et al., 2007; Mmari et al., 2009). We advance *RQ3* to document the questions military youth face upon a parent's arrival home from a tour of duty.

*RQ3:* What issues of uncertainty, if any, do military youth report experiencing during reunion?

## METHOD

We recruited early adolescents to participate in an individual interview during a camp for military youth held in the Midwestern United States during July of 2011. The camp was funded by grant support and offered free of charge. Upon receiving approval from our university's Institutional Review Board, we mailed an informational packet to families of military youth enrolled in the

camp. The packet contained a flyer describing the study along with an invitation for parents to sign an informed consent form and youth to sign an informed assent form if willing to volunteer.

Participants were 31 military youth (20 boys, 11 girls) who had experienced a parent's deployment and return. They ranged in age from 10 to 13 years old ( $M = 11.42$  years,  $SD = 1.15$  years). Their families were affiliated with the U.S. Army National Guard ( $n = 14$ ), the Army ( $n = 13$ ), the Navy ( $n = 2$ ), the Air Force ( $n = 1$ ), and the Air National Guard ( $n = 1$ ). Most participants reported on their father's deployment ( $n = 29$ ); others reported on the deployment of both parents ( $n = 1$ ) or a stepfather ( $n = 1$ ). A majority reported on a homecoming that had taken place within the past 12 months (48%) or the past 24 months (21%). At the time of the interviews, 48% of participants had a parent who was away on a subsequent deployment. Participants received a \$20 gift card to a national retailer to thank them for their time.

Military youth participated in a semistructured individual interview with one of three trained interviewers during a recreational period in the camp. The interviews were designed to be brief for three reasons: (a) to gain insight into participants' experiences before their concentration waned, (b) to limit the length of their absence from the camp's leisure activities, and (c) to prevent them from reflecting for too long on potentially unpleasant issues. The interviews averaged 17.52 minutes in length ( $SD = 7.74$  minutes), which is comparable in duration to other interviews conducted with military youth (e.g., Chandra et al., 2010). The interviews were audiotaped and were divided into three modules: (a) an opening segment solicited demographic information and sought to build rapport between the participant and the interviewer, (b) a middle segment contained questions about deployment, and (c) a final segment inquired about reunion. Data from the first and third modules are reported here.

## RESULTS

### Data Analysis

We analyzed the data inductively using thematic analysis to derive themes from participants' responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012; see also Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Data analysis proceeded in six steps following guidelines advocated by Braun and Clarke (2006). First, the interviews were professionally transcribed into 235 single-spaced pages of text and double-checked for accuracy. Second, four coders (the second author plus three research assistants who were blind to the goals of the study) listened to the audio files and read the transcripts to gain familiarity with the data. Third, working independently, the coders engaged in *open coding* to identify and classify concepts for each research question based on a detailed examination of the data (e.g., Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The coders employed constant comparative techniques by moving through the data sequentially and creating new categories as themes emerged. In a fourth step, the coders met as a team to assess agreement and to compare the themes they had noted on their own. Their goal was to merge their individual ideas into a more comprehensive set; they handled disagreements through discussion to consensus. Fifth, the coders independently engaged in *axial coding* (e.g., Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to organize the dominant themes that surfaced during their meeting. Coders were charged with building an overarching framework of themes for each research question that grouped similar content within themes but distinctive content between themes. In a sixth

and final step, the first two authors collaborated on a higher-order, second round of axial coding for each research question to derive one set of themes for *RQ1*, one set for *RQ2*, and one set for *RQ3*.

Our research design, data collection procedures, and data analysis techniques incorporated several of the *validation strategies* advocated by Creswell (2013, pp. 250–255) for enhancing the accuracy of qualitative inquiry. The interviewers engaged in *persistent observation* during the camp sessions to learn about military culture and to become acquainted with the youth participating in the study. For the purpose of *triangulation*, we incorporated multiple researchers and involved a team of independent coders in the data analysis. We sought *reliability* in the coding task by developing an extensive codebook and by meeting frequently to assess agreement among coders. Finally, we offer *rich, thick description* in our presentation of the results.

As shown in Figure 1, the data revealed four changes to family life (*RQ1*), three ways that reunion matched or violated expectations (*RQ2*), and four issues of uncertainty (*RQ3*). Similar themes were apparent in the responses of military youth who reported on the deployment of their father ( $n = 29$ ) versus both parents ( $n = 1$ ) or a stepfather ( $n = 1$ ), so we combined the data in reporting our results. The following paragraphs describe the themes along with illustrative quotations. Pseudonyms are employed to mask identities. Ellipses in brackets denote where comments were abridged for brevity.

### Changes to Family Life (*RQ1*)

The interviewers began a discussion of how participants' lives changed during reintegration by asking, "Have there been any changes that took place in your family since your family member has been back? If so, what are those changes?" Four themes were apparent in the data: (a) spending time together, (b) experiencing emotional tranquility, (c) returning to patterns in place before deployment, and (d) having difficulty reintegrating the returning service member into everyday routines (see Figure 1).

A first change involved *spending time together* in leisure pursuits. Some military youth described the excitement of homecoming as an opportunity to reconnect as a family, celebrate

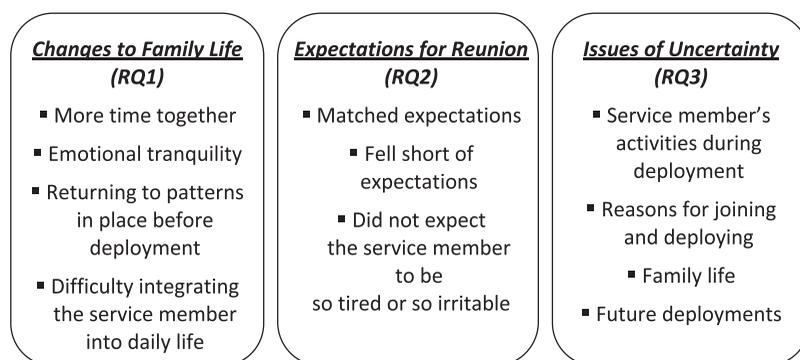


FIGURE 1 Themes for *RQ1*, *RQ2*, and *RQ3*.

together, and engage in special activities. For example, Paul reported a whirlwind of activity involving visits from extended family members and trips to kid-friendly venues:

We had a party for him, and we invited all our family members. Some of them lived pretty far away at the time, and so, well, yeah, most of them couldn't come because of, like, business stuff; they had work, but they came and visited later. After he came home, we spent – me and my brother spent a lot of time with him. We went special places that we normally wouldn't go. [Interviewer: Like?] We went to Chuck E. Cheese's. We usually don't go there, and we went there and we had – we had a lot of fun.

Gus noted that his family traveled more when his father returned home, "I would say he took us to a whole bunch of places. [. . .] Well, we always went on vacation every year, but yeah, a whole bunch of fun things and he got us Xbox and PlayStation." Similarly, Roxanne described quality time interacting with her father, "He would play games with us and stuff." As these comments illustrate, some families marked homecoming with special moments or memorable celebrations.

Other interviewees noted their family's *emotional tranquility* upon reunion. Military youth described a sense of calm that permeated family communication, including more security for themselves, less anxiety for their at-home parent, and more harmonious relationships among their siblings. Kate noted that she and her mother felt more protected with her father home, "I feel safe now that he's back. And, my mom kind of feels safe, too, like, when he was gone, she, like, put the alarm on every night, and now that he's back, she feels more safe, and she only puts the alarm on every other night." Cody noticed nonverbal cues that his mother was more comfortable once she was no longer the sole caregiver:

Cody: She's not as stressed, I mean, about bills or just family life, personal life, or any of that.

Interviewer: So not as stressed. How do you notice that she's not as stressed?

Cody: Well, her hairs aren't graying as much. She dyes her hair, but um, you can hear it in her voice and just see it in her eyes. You can tell if she's stressed or not just by, like, seeing her face expression.

Interviewer: And would you notice that while he was away? Did you notice?

Cody: Yeah, you could see when she was stressed and when she wasn't. Like, I guess at the beginning of the deployment she wasn't *as* stressed cause nothing really happened yet, but uh, during like, what, three-quarters in, I guess, she was getting a little more stressed. You could, like, see it on her face.

Hudson grew more mature by putting to rest his insecurity that his father would leave unexpectedly. Indeed, he took pride in his newfound emotional security by letting go of his fear that his father would disappear suddenly: "I have actually grown very, very confident that my father would never leave without a good-bye. [. . .] [Interviewer: What do you mean by that?] I mean like every single deployment he has gone on he has told us good-bye. He would never leave us without saying good-bye." Other military youth referenced making peace with their brothers and sisters and communicating more cordially. For example, Ryan depicted less conflict with his siblings, "Me and my brother are still getting along, which is very good. Sometimes we fight a little, but other times there's just no fighting at all." These comments, taken together, emphasize the serenity that some military youth experienced after homecoming.

A third theme involved *returning to patterns in place before deployment*. Some military youth described how their family resumed the routines interrupted by deployment. For example, Kevin commented that his family reverted back to their previous interaction style, "Like, when he left

there were some changes, and when he came back everything went back to normal.” Hudson mentioned that his family reinstated their tradition of spending quality time together, and he concluded, “It’s a very good feeling.” Miranda emphasized how her family’s routines were more complete with her father’s presence, “I’m happy that he’s back. [. . .] Cause he wasn’t there, to like, take us to bed and stuff.” Jason was proud of how his family’s identity remained intact throughout the deployment and was solidified during reunion, “Things were the same inside family-wise. We never, you know, like broke our beliefs still and stuff like that.” According to some participants, homecoming was a time to get back to previously established lifestyles, values, and communication patterns.

Other military youth, in contrast, identified *difficulty reintegrating the returning service member into everyday routines*. Military youth encountered problems adapting to new patterns of discipline, adjusting to changes in the returning service member’s personality and physical health, and acclimating to having another person around the house. For example, Anna described how her mother’s laid-back schedule was supplanted by the more rigorous routine her father implemented when he arrived home, “Our rules have gotten stricter, and we’ve had an even earlier time we have to be inside, and get to bed, wash up, and we have to be in the shower and get out of it in like five minutes. And it’s very stricter when he’s here.” Jermichael depicted upheaval stemming from his father’s fatigue and his siblings’ adjustment problems:

Yes, because when my dad got home, he was exhausted. He was just happy to be on land for once, actually, because he hadn’t been on land for a while. And I mean, I would have been happy to be on land, too, but it was just – he was tired and my mom’s like, “Yay, he’s home,” and then it’s like [*sarcastically*], “Oh great, here we go.” And I was, like, older now, and I was like, “Here we go,” and [my little brother] was older, my little brother was older, so he got more feisty. And my sister actually began to make it where she’ll go without sleeping. Yeah, it was horrible.

David reported that his father’s temperament had become more anxious, edgy, and hostile. These personality changes spilled over into the communication David had with his father:

I think maybe a little stressed because I don’t know all that happened when he left the first time, so I just think him kinda being there in like Iraq the first time, he might have saw something, or just being there might of triggered something, so maybe a little bit more stress. [. . .] Just he kind of felt a little bit uneasy at times, and he would get kind of angry more, quicker than he used to.

Whereas David focused on differences in his father’s demeanor, Joel described changes in his father’s physical well-being. In particular, he recounted how his family’s bedtime routine was affected by his father’s rehabilitation of an injury sustained overseas:

Yeah, he [changed] because he injured his leg on accident. He was doing a mission and he accidentally hurt his leg, so now he has to do – like, last time when he came home, he had to build this one like, little step thing and he had to do those for 15 minutes each and every night. So at 9:15, we would sit there and watch him, and at 9:30 he would stop and tuck us into bed.

Ella expressed frustration over having her father back home, and she complained about his unwillingness to share, “He’s been, like, hogging stuff, and stuff like that. [. . .] Like the TV and everything. He says it’s his TV.” These statements, as a set, underscore the challenges of incorporating a service member back into domestic life. Military youth noted a variety of disruptions to their everyday activities that occurred during reintegration.

### Expectations for Reunion (RQ2)

The interviewers introduced the topic of expectations for reunion by asking, "Is having your family member home been like what you expected? Why or why not?" Three themes were evident from participants' responses: (a) the reunion matched their expectations, (b) the reunion fell short of their expectations, and (c) they did not expect the returning service member to be so tired or so irritable (see Figure 1).

Some military youth said that the reunion *matched their expectations*. These comments depicted reintegration as a return to the constructive, neutral, and/or destructive communication dynamics established before deployment. Amber remarked that her family resumed their ritual of engaging in quality time together, "[We're] still having the fun stuff we used to, taking me and my mom out to do fun things. [ . . . ] Just expected it to be the way it was." Other participants characterized the reunion in more neutral terms and emphasized that it fit with what they had envisioned. Jason said, "I guess what I expected was just, you know, him to come home, and just get back to our regular routine of what we do during life, and that's what happened, so." Miranda, too, anticipated her father's homecoming accurately: "It was the way I expected it. [ . . . ] Because I thought he'd be a little bit the same when he came back. [ . . . ] He'd still take us places and he'd still put us to bed and stuff." Anna described how her parents reverted back to the conflict patterns in place before her father left, "He had gotten a new truck, he had gotten us, uh, snakes, and big tanks and stuff, so he had used a lot of money up, and they – my parents fought a lot, actually. [ . . . ] I expected them to fight, they do that a lot." Thus, some military youth reported that their parent's homecoming was congruent with their expectations about the positive, neutral, and negative aspects of family interaction upon reunion.

Others noted that homecoming *fell short of their expectations*. In contrast to the previous theme, some military youth expressed intense disappointment with how reintegration unfolded. They described feeling disheartened that the returning service member was so busy, hurt that they did not receive more attention, and overwhelmed by the changes that occurred. Kevin, for example, had developed an idyllic image of homecoming that was not compatible with his father's degree of engagement. He admitted, "It was way different. I thought it was gonna be like the movies, you know, in the movies, how, like, they go swimming and have so much fun. Well, my dad, he did a bunch of paperwork and stuff, so that was it." Ella felt betrayed that her father purchased presents for other people but not her, "When he came back, he brought all this stuff home, and he didn't give me anything. And like, he gave it to my mom's friends and everything, and I didn't get nothing." Adam had constructed a romanticized view of his father's disciplinary style that did not mesh with reality, "But [it was] not like the dreams I had when he was back. [Interviewer: What were the dreams that you had?] Like, I dreamed that he would, like, not be so strict and like, just, like he was before he left. [ . . . ] He's more strict, but that's probably because he did so much work over there." Other military youth reported being inundated with changes that occurred all at once. For instance, Jermichael's family moved to a new city the week after his father returned from overseas. Jermichael had problems navigating the pile-up of stressors, "It was more difficult than I actually expected for him to be back. [ . . . ] I was really caught off guard by the changes because I was expecting it to be the same way when he left that it was when he got back. [ . . . ] Change back into our normal routine, but with moving there, all in one timeframe, and too much commotion." Viewed together, these comments illustrate how some military youth

were disappointed that their interactions with the returning service member were not as pleasant as they had hoped.

A third theme was that participants *did not expect the returning service member to be so tired or so irritable*. Some military youth were caught unaware by how weary, run-down, moody, and short-tempered their parent was upon homecoming. Roxanne, for example, was surprised that her father was too exhausted to engage with her family, “Like, I kind of expected him like not to be so sleepy, but he was really, really sleepy. For the first couple days like, he didn’t really get out of bed and I was like, ‘Why isn’t he getting out of bed? Like, everyone else is.’” Kevin was disappointed that his father’s tiredness prevented them from interacting, “One time, like, I was gonna go see a movie with him, but he fell asleep cause, like, he had to do so much work, and he was so tired, and he fell asleep, so that got in the way.” Pete had hoped for a fun-filled celebration of homecoming that did not materialize, “I was expecting us to be going someplace actually nice after we do something with him the day after, well, all he really did was sleep and then we stayed at home all day.” Similarly, Megan’s expectations for family communication and household activities were violated by her father’s lack of energy:

Not really, because I expected it to be all happy. He could do everything now because he was home, but he kind of was a bit more lazy than we would have thought he was because he just had to wake up a lot. I mean I understood that he wanted to sleep, but then, “Can we go to the zoo?” “No, I’m too tired.” “Can we go to the pool?” “No, I’m too tired.” He kind of really wasn’t really taking charge of most things, so mom got really ticked off, and said, “I told you to please wash the table an hour ago.” And he said, “What?” [Interviewer: Oh, like he would forget to do things, or he was just tired?] Too tired, forget, do it sloppily. It was kind of like Rick got home, but not dad.

Michael held more realistic expectations for his father’s energy level after the second deployment compared to the first deployment, “I thought he’d just want to play, play, play, but he wanted to sleep. Well, that’s how the first time he was – the second time I knew he was gonna wanna sleep. [ . . . ] He slept on the couch. He fell asleep on the couch while watching TV.” Ella was surprised by her father’s hostile demeanor, “I expected him, like, I dunno, being a little bit nicer and everything like that, and he’s been a grouch and everything.” Lori, for her part, learned to be on guard not to upset her father, “When my dad comes back from being out or deployed, um, he’s still in the Army mode, and so me and my sister have to be kind of careful with what we do sometimes, because his anger – his temper can get up really high.” These comments, and others like them, revealed that some military youth were disappointed by how exhausted or cantankerous the returning service member was during homecoming.

### Issues of Uncertainty (RQ3)

The interviewers broached the topic of uncertainty by asking, “Did you have any questions about your family after you were reunited? If so, what questions did you have about your family?” An example of a follow-up question that probed for specific examples was, “If you could ask your parents anything in the world, what would you ask?” (adapted from Richardson, 2004). Four themes emerged from the data, including uncertainty about (a) the service member’s activities during deployment, (b) reasons for joining the military and being deployed, (c) family life, and (d) the possibility of future deployments (see Figure 1).

Some participants grappled with questions about *the service member's activities during deployment*. For example, military youth wanted to know more about day-to-day aspects of the service member's routines while deployed. Their comments suggested that they were in the dark about fundamental aspects of their parent's lifestyle while overseas. Cody was curious about facets of his father's daily activities, "Well, I had questions for him, like asking him, 'What was Iraq like? What did you eat?' And all, like, the questions that you probably would ask him when he got back." Megan voiced similar questions about her father's everyday life overseas, "I really wanted to know what he was doing." David did not view his mother as a credible source of information about what his father's life was like during deployment, "Probably like, what I probably would ask him, because mom has never been deployed, but kind of what it is like being there, what changes he had to make, and like, what maybe happened there, or whatever." Pete said he would ask his father, "How was it? How was the weather?" Other participants hinted that they wanted to know about combat. For example, Andrew wondered whether his father's work was glamorous versus mundane, "Well, how did it go and what did you do? I wish I was there. I – I always think of him as going around shooting people instead of just sitting in an office, and working on cars, and sleeping." Although Paul came to realize that his father's experience was different than media depictions, he reported lingering questions avoided by his father:

During the time, I always thought my dad was, like – I used to watch TV, movies, and TV shows, but I always thought he was, like, one of the people on the front line shooting at the enemy. He really wasn't too much. During the time, he actually fixed most of the computers, and uh, he was only – he was only, like, fighting sometimes, like when he was on convoy duty and he'd walk with the convoys, like the troops and stuff in the jeeps. He – he told us that sometimes he was fired upon, that he fired back, but he never knew if he actually got anybody. He doesn't really want to know. [ . . . ] I'd ask my dad, uh, what it was like when he was overseas, and like, for him to explain it in detail. Well, if I ask him, I don't ask him too much and usually he just tells me a part, but he doesn't really tell me everything, but I'd like to know.

Evan was uncertain how much danger his father encountered, "How safe he is every day? Like, does he go out – does he go out and search buildings, or does he sit around and, like, order people around?" Kevin lamented his father's reticence to answer questions about combat, and he described their elaborate cycle of questioning and avoidance:

- Kevin: Yeah, I asked him, like, what do they do there, and how do they eat, and, yeah, stuff like that.
- Interviewer: And how does it go when you ask him questions?
- Kevin: Um, the ones are like, the ones that have to do with combat and stuff, you know, he answers, like, half of them, and then the other half he's like, "Um, it's classified" and stuff. So, like, half the questions I ask him, I never get them answered.
- Interviewer: How does that make you feel?
- Kevin: It makes me want to join the Army even more.
- Interviewer: Why?
- Kevin: To find out why I can't get the answers to those questions, and if I do join the Army then I'll get the answers to those questions.
- Interviewer: [ . . . ] Any [other] questions?
- Kevin: Have you ever shot someone? Yeah, that's – that's the one I always ask, but he never answers.
- Interviewer: What does he normally say?

Kevin: He's like, go clean your room, or go vacuum, or go take out the trash. And he always gets me, because, like, I manage to, like, not do those stuff, so every time I ask him, I, like, do all the stuff before and ask him, then he'll tell me to do something new.

Michael narrated how he learned that asking his father about combat was off-limits:

Michael: I know what it's not.

Interviewer: What's it not?

Michael: It's not "How many people have you killed?"

Interviewer: That's not what you would ask?

Michael: My friend did that. My friend did that, and he's like, "Um, no, [buddy]." [. . .] I know not to ask him that.

Interviewer: Why is that?

Michael: Because it just brings memories to him, bad memories that he doesn't like. [. . .] Because I asked him when I was little and he said, "No, I'm not telling you 'cause I don't want to talk about it."

In total, military youth were unsure about the service member's everyday routines, warzone duties, exposure to combat, and involvement in dangerous situations while overseas.

Uncertainty about *reasons for joining and deploying* constituted a second theme. Participants recounted a variety of questions about why their parent enlisted in the military and why he or she received deployment orders. Ambiguity about the service member's motivation was at the heart of these comments. Miranda wondered, "Why did my dad go into the Army?" Scott said his only question was about the reason for his father's tour of duty, "Why does he have to get deployed? That's basically it." Jason questioned his father's decision-making process that resulted in deployment, "Why did you want to go to Iraq, you know? Why did you pick this job if you knew you had to go to Iraq?" Kate was not satisfied with the information her father had given her about why he had deployed, "[My questions were] mostly like his main work. I asked him, and he just told me that he was basically just signing checks and all that. [. . .] [Why] do they send people overseas if they're just gonna be signing checks and all that?" As these comments illustrate, some participants wanted more information about why their parent joined the military and why he or she was assigned overseas.

A third theme contained a variety of questions about *family life* stemming from deployment. In particular, participants were unsure about the strength of their parents' bond and the best strategies for building family ties. Anna wondered about her parents' marriage:

Maybe like June last year, maybe, they said they were going to get a divorce. They were majorly fighting, like my dad had moved out, and they, like, were getting very mad. My dad punched a hole in the wall. They were getting mad at each other, so they said they were getting divorced. [. . .] I don't know if they are, um, gonna get divorced still or not because this was last year in June, but they still are fighting, and seem to consider it a lot. Because they've still got the papers, and stuff is already signed, and I don't know what's going on actually.

Other participants had questions about how to grow closer as a family. Alexis was uncertain about how to improve the communication in her family, "Probably, um, how to keep in touch more. Like, talk better." Sara wanted to know if her father could spend more time with her, "I would ask my dad if he could take me fishing. He's taken me fishing me once, but we could only go for five minutes because he got called in for work." Similarly, Hudson was unsure about the best

ways “to have more fun time with my family and be encouraged more.” Gus wondered how to maintain family harmony in light of his siblings’ difficulty adapting to his father’s return:

If my brother and sister would get yelled at, since my sister was like the oldest, she would always just – she would come in my room or something, or she would come over and say to me, “Isn’t dad like being so mean?” or something, or “I just want to go away.” Because, yeah, that’s how my sister is sometimes, yeah. [Interviewer: So what kind of questions did that raise about your family?] Well, I would just be like, “Don’t say that, he just got back.”

Participants grappled with a variety of questions about family dynamics during homecoming.

A final theme was uncertainty about *future deployments*. Comments in this category depicted fear of loss, anxiety over the possibility of another separation, and apprehension about what military life held in the future. Ryan reported what he would ask his father, “I would say, ‘Are you gonna leave again? Are you gonna leave again?’” Roxanne also speculated about the potential for a subsequent deployment, “Not for him to leave again. [. . .] Because like, he told us – like, um, the year before he left, like in ’09, he told us that he might have to go back to Iraq and me and my sister just started crying. We were like, ‘No, we don’t want you to go.’ And then he’s like, ‘Well, I’m sorry.’” Robert expressed similar worries, “For my dad not to be deployed again, that way we can have a full family again. [. . .] Kind of like, it’s difficult, like, it’s difficult when you don’t have a father there to help you through stuff.” Amber said she would ask her father, “When will you get deployed again?” A clear issue of uncertainty was whether the service member would receive orders for another tour of duty, what an impending separation would mean for family life, and how to voice those questions to parents.

## DISCUSSION

The goal of this study was to illuminate military youth’s communicative experiences during a parent’s return home from deployment. We turned to the emotional cycle of deployment model (Pincus et al., 2001; see also Morse, 2006) to guide a qualitative study of military youth’s perceptions of postdeployment reintegration. Our sample contained 31 early adolescents, a developmental cohort negotiating the tasks of honing social skills and forming a distinctive identity (e.g., Fitzsimons & Krause-Parello, 2009; Pincus et al., 2001), navigating transitions such as the entry into middle school and the arrival of puberty, combating the onset of symptoms of depression and anxiety (e.g., Cicchetti & Toth, 1998; Karevold et al., 2009), and drawing on family support for academic motivation (e.g., Duchesne & Larose, 2007; Johnson, 2010). Next, we articulate how our study extends work in this area by (a) investigating reintegration vis-à-vis the emotional cycle of deployment model (e.g., MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010) and seminal theories of communication (Altman & Taylor, 1973; Berger & Bradac, 1982; Burgoon, 1993), (b) providing insight into military youth’s communicative experiences in their own words (e.g., Park, 2011), and (c) suggesting recommendations for military family policy and practice (e.g., Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Hardaway, 2004). We conclude by discussing limitations of our study and directions for future work.

We utilized the emotional cycle of deployment model (Pincus et al., 2001; see also Morse, 2006), a widely cited but rarely studied theory of military family dynamics (MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010; Park, 2011), to identify core constructs likely to play a role in how military

youth make sense of the reunion period. We supplemented the model's logic with foundational theorizing about communication to gain a more nuanced view of family interaction processes. First and foremost, the model suggests that change is a key component of reintegration for military youth (Morse, 2006; Pincus et al., 2001), and communication perspectives on relationship development highlight the importance of change as well (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Solomon et al., 2010; Werner & Baxter, 1994). We drew on this logic to investigate the changes to family life that are visible to military youth upon a parent's arrival home (*RQ1*). Participants reported spending quality time together, experiencing emotional tranquility, resuming the family dynamics in place before deployment, and having trouble incorporating the deployed parent back into daily routines (see Figure 1). Notably, these themes span the gamut of constructive, neutral, and negative changes, consistent with the model's assumption that the deployment cycle offers opportunities for relational growth as well as decline (Pincus et al., 2001). A lingering question, of course, involves the parameters that govern whether military youth appraise the changes as positive versus negative. Consequently, we echo Lipari et al.'s (2010) call for additional research on the factors that promote or attenuate stress among military youth across the stages of deployment.

According to the emotional cycle of deployment model, military families risk disillusionment if their expectations for reunion are loftier than reality (Morse, 2006; Pincus et al., 2001). Theories of communication, too, spotlight expectations as essential to the sense-making process (Afifi & Metts, 1998; Burgoon, 1993; Burgoon & Hale, 1988). We sought to examine this issue by asking military youth to identify how their actual experiences meshed or clashed with their expectations for reunion (*RQ2*). Although some military youth reported that homecoming was compatible with their expectations, others noted that homecoming was less idyllic than they had anticipated based on romanticized images portrayed in the media, and still others were surprised by how exhausted or how short-tempered the returning service member was during homecoming (see Figure 1). Conspicuously absent were comments that homecoming exceed participants' expectations. Taken together, these results are commensurate with the model's logic that reintegration may be particularly stressful for military youth who construct unrealistic expectations for reunion and ultimately are disappointed. (As Kevin remarked, "I thought it was gonna be like the movies.") Implications for practice are that caregivers should (a) help military youth conceptualize reunion in a sensible way, and (b) prepare them for the possibility that the service member will need time to rest and recover.

The emotional cycle of deployment model also implies that uncertainty is likely to permeate military youth's communicative experiences of reintegration (Morse, 2006; Pincus et al., 2001). This logic is congruent with the communication discipline's long-standing focus on the interplay among uncertainty, message production, and message processing (Afifi & Morse, 2009; Berger & Bradac, 1982; Brashers, 2007). Although research has alluded to the possibility that military youth may grapple with questions about family life during reunion (e.g., Huebner et al., 2007; Mmari et al., 2009; Pfefferbaum, Houston, Sherman, & Melson, 2011), we are not aware of any work that has examined the issues of uncertainty military youth encounter upon homecoming. Findings for *RQ3* identified four themes of uncertainty, three of which pertain to military service explicitly. Participants grappled with questions about (a) what their parent's life was like during deployment, (b) why their parent enlisted in the military and why he or she deployed, (c) how to understand family dynamics, and (d) whether the service member will deploy again in the future (see Figure 1). The first theme is noteworthy in light of Hardaway's (2004) assertion that military

youth need a basic understanding of the deployed parent's daily routines to dispel the fantasies they otherwise construct. As a whole, the themes are notable when coupled with recent claims that military youth who are able to find meaning in their family's sacrifices and accomplishments may be more resilient across the deployment cycle (Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Houston et al., 2009; Lester et al., 2011). A pragmatic recommendation is that caregivers should prioritize communication practices that help military youth comprehend and appreciate their family's commitment to military life.

The data for *RQ3*, viewed on a broader level, illuminate a communicative dilemma facing military families upon reintegration. Military youth expressed a strong desire to learn more about their deployed parent's daily activities and combat experiences while overseas, but their attempts to seek information were met with avoidance, equivocation, and even rebuffs. Indeed, our data featured poignant accounts of how dogmatically some parents evaded questions (e.g., Paul: "Usually he just tells me a part, but he doesn't really tell me everything, but I'd like to know.") and how frustrated some military youth were by age-inappropriate answers (e.g., Kate: "[Why] do they send people overseas if they're just gonna be signing checks and all that?"). These findings underscore the complexities of seeking and avoiding information about the dangers of deployment among military youth, who presumably want answers, and parents, who presumably want to protect their offspring from anxiety (see also Knobloch & Satterlee, 2009; Richardson, 2004). With respect to practice, the results imply that – at the very least – caregivers should refrain from being dismissive of military youth's strong drive for information about deployment.

At present, sophisticated training programs are being implemented to help military families cultivate their social skills across the deployment cycle, in general (Huebner, Mancini, Bowen, & Orthner, 2009; Lester et al., 2011), and upon a service member's return home from deployment, in particular (e.g., Wilson et al., 2011). Our findings imply recommendations for practice that complement those training programs by suggesting ways caregivers can communicate with sensitivity to the needs of military youth during reunion. First, the emotional cycle of deployment model is predicated on the idea that military families who are knowledgeable about interaction dynamics across the trajectory of deployment will fare better during a tour of duty (Morse, 2006; Pincus et al., 2001). This claim implies that educating military families about the themes portrayed in our data would be useful preparation for homecoming. Second, some participants reported difficulty acclimating to the changes to their everyday lives during reunion. These results suggest that caregivers should preserve family routines as much as possible while reintegrating a service member back into domestic life (e.g., Chandra et al., 2011; Miller, Miller, & Bjorklund, 2010; Mmari et al., 2009). Third, some participants felt hurt, let down, and frustrated by the mismatch between their rose-colored expectations for reunion and the reality of homecoming. These findings imply that caregivers should talk with military youth about realistic versus unrealistic expectations and help them construct more pragmatic images of reintegration (e.g., Hardaway, 2004).

Limitations of our work are important to consider. First, we recruited attendees at a summer camp for military youth. The camp was subsidized by grants rather than tuition, so military youth from both economically disadvantaged and economically affluent families were eligible to participate, but our results probably overemphasize the experiences of military families who are sophisticated enough (or distressed enough) to take advantage of the available resources. Second, we limited the length of the interviews to be considerate of participants' needs, but our decision

also restricted the richness of our interview protocol, and ultimately, our data. Consider just one example: Uncertainty can stem from a lack of information, conflicting information, and/or information overload (e.g., Berger & Bradac, 1982; Knobloch, 2010; Knobloch & Satterlee, 2009), but fitting the interviews around the camp schedule prevented us from exploring variegated manifestations of uncertainty. A third limitation is that some participants reported on a reunion that occurred when they were quite a bit younger, so their recollections may be hazy or clouded by developmental changes.

A direction for future research is to consider the role of demographic characteristics. The design of our study was not conducive to evaluating how participants' age, gender, and military branch affiliation shape their communicative experiences upon reunion, but recent quantitative investigations have documented demographic differences for military youth across the deployment cycle (Chandra et al., 2011; Chandra et al., 2010; Gorman, Eide, & Hisle-Gorman, 2010). Additional work along these lines would have both conceptual and pragmatic benefits by (a) evaluating whether the singular trajectory proposed by the emotional cycle of deployment model is able to account for diverse military family configurations (e.g., MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010), and (b) providing insight into how to tailor interventions to best meet the needs of particular cohorts of military youth (e.g., Chandra et al., 2010). A second avenue for inquiry is to delve more deeply into the communicative dilemmas military families face upon reunion. Our data suggest two interaction processes salient in military youth's portrayal of the reunion period: (a) making sense of the changes to family life that arise during homecoming, and (b) seeking information about the service member's deployment activities despite parents' reticence to share those details. Our results lay a foundation for scholars to hone in on these communicative processes in future research.

## CONCLUSION

This study, informed by the emotional cycle of deployment model (Pincus et al., 2001; see also Morse, 2006) and prominent theories of communication (e.g., Altman & Taylor, 1973; Berger & Bradac, 1982; Burgoon, 1993), sought to illuminate military youth's communicative experiences of postdeployment reintegration. Our data revealed several changes to family life that military youth experience upon homecoming (*RQ1*), ways that the transition was consistent or inconsistent with their expectations (*RQ2*), and issues of uncertainty that they wonder about (*RQ3*).

Our findings enhance scholarship on military families by delineating early adolescents' thoughts, feelings, and behaviors about reintegration in their own words, and they broaden the communication literature by documenting the interaction dynamics that are pervasive as military youth navigate reintegration. Indeed, our data underscore Bowling and Sherman's (2008) theorizing that a vital task during homecoming is for military families to derive meaning from the separation. Our findings for *RQ2* and *RQ3*, in particular, showcase how important it is for military youth to make sense of their family's service to their country (e.g., Houston et al., 2009; Lester et al., 2011). Our results also emphasize the intricacies of family communication about war: Whereas military youth appear intensely curious about the activities of the service member while overseas, parents seem willing to go to great lengths to dodge questions and sidestep the issues. We hope that giving voice to military youth's communicative experiences during reunion will prove useful for helping military families negotiate homecoming successfully.

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# Experiences of Military Youth During a Family Member's Deployment: Changes, Challenges, and Opportunities

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## Abstract

The deployment of a family member can be very distressing for military children, but it also can supply opportunities for growth. This study addresses calls for research on the changes, challenges, and opportunities facing youth during a family member's tour of duty. It uses the relational turbulence model to frame research questions about how children experience a family member's deployment. Participants were 33 military youth ranging from 10 to 13 years of age who completed one-on-one, semistructured interviews. They reported several changes to family life (Research Question 1), challenges of deployment (Research Question 2), and opportunities of deployment (Research Question 3). The results contribute to the literature by advancing theory, by providing insight into children's experiences in their own words, and by suggesting practical guidelines for helping youth navigate a family member's deployment.

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**Keywords**

military deployment, military youth, relational turbulence model, transitions

Military children in large numbers have been affected by the increased operational tempo of deployments since the onset of Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. When a family member is deployed, youth are at risk for emotional and behavioral problems (Chandra, Lara-Cinisomo, et al., 2010; Lester et al., 2010; Lipari, Winters, Matos, Smith, & Rock, 2010), health complaints (Gorman, Eide, & Hisle-Gorman, 2010), elevated blood pressure (Barnes, Davis, & Treiber, 2007), and academic difficulty (Engel, Gallagher, & Lyle, 2010). Clearly, deployment can be very difficult for children (Flake, Davis, Johnson, & Middleton, 2009), yet despite these stressors, many youth are remarkably resilient (Lester et al., 2011; Park, 2011). This contrast underscores the need for an in-depth understanding of how children think, feel, and act during a family member's tour of duty (e.g., Houston et al., 2009; Mmari, Roche, Sudhinaraset, & Blum, 2009). In fact, the literature is replete with calls for more research on children's experiences when a family member is deployed (e.g., Flake et al., 2009; Lester et al., 2010; MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010).

A theory-driven study that solicited the perspectives of youth in their own words would be valuable for addressing four gaps in the literature. First, scholars have emphasized the importance of employing established conceptual frameworks to guide research on this topic (Park, 2011). Second, the bulk of work has focused on the negative consequences of deployment, which leaves unanswered questions about opportunities for growth (Palmer, 2008; Park, 2011; Ternus, 2010). On a methodological level, narratives gleaned from one-on-one interviews with children would complement previous studies soliciting the reports of parents (e.g., Flake et al., 2009; Lipari et al., 2010) and the comments of adolescents in focus groups (e.g., Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass, 2007; Mmari et al., 2009). Perhaps the most important contribution, however, would be pragmatic. Insight into this topic would be useful to parents, caregivers, teachers, practitioners, and military personnel who seek to improve the quality of life for children when a family member is completing a tour of duty.

The purpose of our study is to illuminate the changes, challenges, and opportunities youth experience during a family member's deployment. We focus our attention on early adolescents 10 to 13 years of age, a developmental cohort striving to cultivate social competence and formulate a sense of self in the midst of the tour of duty (e.g., Fitzsimons & Krause-Parello, 2009;

Pincus, House, Christenson, & Adler, 2001). We turn to the *relational turbulence model*, a theory relevant to understanding military spouses in the context of deployment (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011, 2012), to guide our investigation. We report a qualitative study in which 33 military children described their experiences when a family member was deployed.

## Relational Turbulence and Military Deployment

The relational turbulence model considers how individuals experience transitions within interpersonal relationships (Knobloch & Theiss, 2012; Solomon, Weber, & Steuber, 2010). The model conceptualizes *transitions* as phases in relationship development that correspond with shifts in how people think and feel about their ties with each other (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011). The model argues that transitions are turbulent because individuals grapple with uncertainty about their relationships and encounter interference in their daily routines. It proposes that transitions can spark both negatively valenced and positively valenced outcomes (Solomon & Theiss, 2011). On one hand, transitions can be stressful, debilitating, and traumatic for individuals and their relationships. On the other hand, transitions also provide opportunities for individuals and their relationships to grow, mature, and flourish. Accordingly, the model emphasizes that times of transition are critical junctures in the development of relationships.

Whereas the model has shown utility for illuminating how military spouses communicate following a tour of duty (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011, 2012; Theiss & Knobloch, 2014), we extend a step further by considering the model's applicability to the experiences of children during deployment. The model highlights three constructs that are central to this context: change, challenge, and opportunity. *Change*, the first of these core ideas, is undoubtedly relevant to youth negotiating a family member's deployment (Chandra, Burns, Tanielian, & Jaycox, 2011; MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010; Park, 2011). Conjecture exists that children may face changes such as completing additional household tasks, caring for younger siblings, becoming a confidant for their at-home parent, and managing intense emotion (Chandra, Martin, Hawkins, & Richardson, 2010; Houston et al., 2009; Huebner et al., 2007). Although previous work hints at the changes youth may undergo during a family member's deployment, a more systematic investigation would advance both theory and practice in this area. Therefore, we pose Research Question 1:

*Research Question 1:* What changes to family life, if any, do youth report experiencing when a family member is deployed?

The relational turbulence model also identifies *challenges* as a key component of transitions (Knobloch & Theiss, 2012; Solomon & Theiss, 2011). Children are likely to face substantial challenges in light of evidence that deployment takes a toll on both their physical and emotional health (Chandra, Lara-Cinisomo, et al., 2010; Gorman et al., 2010; Lipari et al., 2010). Extant findings imply that youth may worry about the service member's safety, feel lonely when the service member misses special occasions, and struggle to complete new domestic duties (Chandra, Burns, Tanielian, Jaycox, & Scott, 2008; Houston et al., 2009; Huebner et al., 2007). A comprehensive look at the challenges that are salient to youth during deployment would be a valuable addition to the literature. Hence, we offer Research Question 2:

*Research Question 2:* What challenges, if any, do youth report experiencing when a family member is deployed?

Finally, the relational turbulence model conceptualizes *opportunities* as a fundamental feature of transitions (Solomon & Theiss, 2011). Work delineating the positive consequences of deployment for families is markedly rare (Park, 2011). Newby et al. (2005) asked soldiers to describe whether anything positive had come from their peacekeeping mission to Bosnia; the data revealed responses such as earning additional money, growing as a person, having time to reflect, and building a stronger romantic relationship. With respect to children, scholars have speculated that youth may take pride in both their family member's service and their own maturation (Houston et al., 2009; Mmari et al., 2009). At-parents report that their children feel proud of their family member's service and act more independently during deployment (Chandra et al., 2008). We submit Research Question 3 to more fully illuminate the issue via children's perspectives:

*Research Question 3:* What positive outcomes, if any, do youth report experiencing when a family member is deployed?

## Method

We conducted in-depth interviews of military children who had experienced a family member's deployment. The interviews took place during a 5-day residential camp offered to military youth at no cost during the summer of 2011. After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, we mailed families a packet of information describing the study. The packet included an informed consent form for parents and an informed assent form for children.

The sample contained 33 children who had experienced a family member's deployment. Participants were 21 boys and 12 girls whose age ranged from 10 to 13 years ( $M = 11.39$  years,  $SD = 1.11$  years). For most youth, the deployed family member was their father ( $n = 30$ ), but for other participants it was both of their parents ( $n = 1$ ), their stepfather ( $n = 1$ ), or their brother ( $n = 1$ ). The deployed family member was part of the U.S. Army ( $n = 14$ ), the Army National Guard ( $n = 15$ ), the Navy ( $n = 2$ ), the Air Force ( $n = 1$ ), and the Air National Guard ( $n = 1$ ).

Approximately half of the youth participated in the study while their family member was overseas ( $n = 17$ ). For the half whose family member had returned home ( $n = 16$ ), most were interviewed within 1 year ( $n = 6$ ) or within 2 years ( $n = 6$ ) of homecoming. The majority had experienced at least one cycle of deployment and reunion ( $n = 31$ ), but two participants were awaiting their family member's return from a first tour of duty.

Three trained interviewers conducted one-on-one, semistructured, and audiotaped interviews during a recreational period in the camp. The interviewers kept the interviews concise to (a) retain children's attention, (b) ensure that they did not miss too much of the camp's leisure activities, and (c) protect them from dwelling for too long on potentially negative experiences (interview length  $M = 17.52$  minutes,  $SD = 7.74$  minutes). The first phase of the interview garnered demographic data and was designed to foster rapport, the second phase focused on the participant's family life during deployment, and the third phase asked about the participant's family life during reunion. This article reports data from the first two phases of the interviews.

## Results

### Data Analysis

We conducted a thematic analysis to inductively derive themes from the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). We followed steps recommended by Braun and Clarke and involved a team of independent judges in the coding process to enhance validity. In a prerequisite phase, we submitted the interview recordings for professional transcription and verified the accuracy of the 249 single-spaced pages of text that resulted. Then, the second author and three independent observers who were blind to the study's objectives read the transcripts and listened to the audio recordings multiple times to become acquainted with the data. In a third stage, the judges engaged in *open coding* to identify and label the emerging themes for each interview question (e.g., Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The

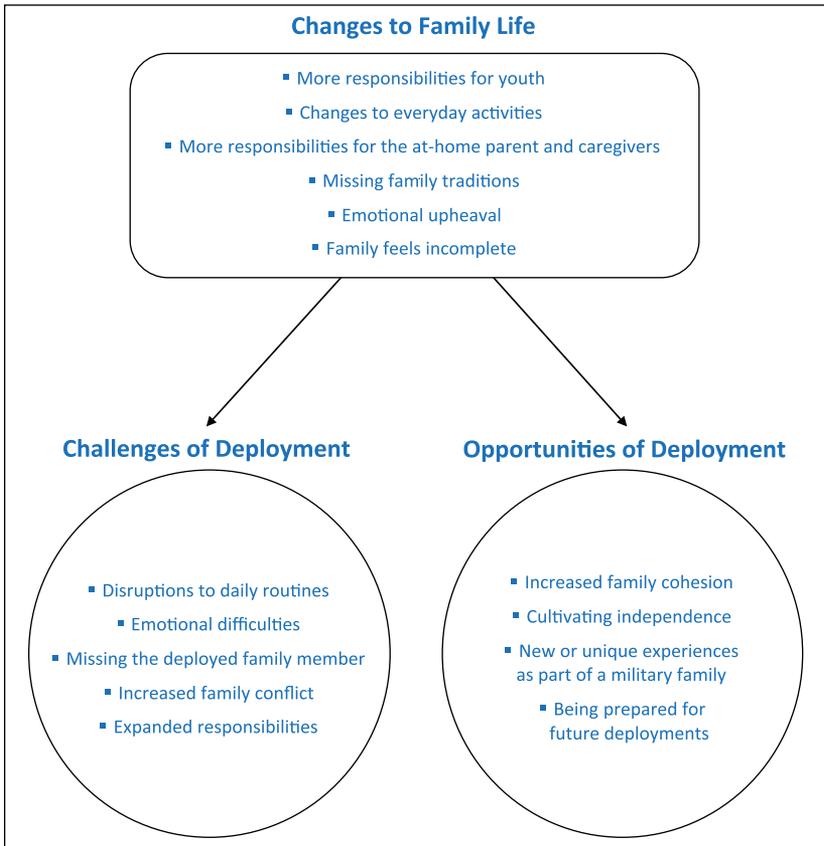
judges proceeded through the data sequentially, comparing children's responses and adding new themes as necessary via constant comparative techniques. Next, the judges gathered to discuss the similarities and differences among the themes they had extracted when working alone. They organized, refined, and collated their individual ideas into a more unified set. In a fifth stage, the judges engaged in *axial coding* (e.g., Corbin & Strauss, 2008); they worked independently to label and categorize the themes that emerged during their discussion. The goal of this stage was for each judge to construct an overarching scheme for each research question that contained (a) relatively uniform content within each theme, but (b) clearly distinct content between themes. In a final step, the first and second authors engaged in a second-order round of axial coding by working together to devise a single framework of themes for each research question.

The following subsections report our findings regarding changes to family life (Research Question 1), challenges of deployment (Research Question 2), and opportunities of deployment (Research Question 3). For descriptive purposes, we report the percentage of participants who mentioned each theme (but note that the values do not add to 100% because some children mentioned multiple themes). We provide quotations as exemplars, employ pseudonyms to protect confidentiality, and use ellipses in brackets to specify where speaking turns were abridged for brevity. See Figure 1 for a pictorial representation of our findings.

### *Changes to Family Life*

Interviewers raised the topic of changes to family life (Research Question 1) by asking the following question: "When a family member is away on deployment, many families have to make changes. Did your family have to make any changes? If so, what were those changes?" (See Table 1 for additional exemplars.) Some participants mentioned *more responsibilities for youth* as a change in their family (36%). Children took on additional tasks and met new standards for behavior. According to Manuel, "I do more chores than I regularly would. [. . .] Mow the backyard a lot more. I babysit my little brother and sister a lot more than I would regularly, and just help out around the house a lot more." Jada also depicted her new responsibilities:

Yeah, we had to make big changes. Like, I had to step up and become like the new dad, because I have other siblings to take care of. [. . .] Everybody's dishes, the laundry, and you know, just getting them ready for school in the morning, and just taking them to their friends' house. Just, like, normal stuff.



**Figure 1.** A relational turbulence model of military children’s experiences of deployment.

Other youth identified new obligations for behaving well. Patrick tried to maintain harmony, “We made a change. Me and my brother used to fight all the time, so me and my brother has to get along now.” Similarly, Finley attempted to be more obedient, “Really just trying more to listen to my mom, I usually only listen to my dad a lot, you know?” In total, youth reported adopting more duties and more mature behaviors during deployment.

*Changes to everyday activities* comprised a second theme (33%). Lamar’s family spent time differently, “We’d go to the movies a lot more—because it keeps mom’s mind off all the stuff.” Mary altered her sleep schedule:

**Table 1.** Changes to Family Life.**1. More responsibilities for youth (mentioned by 36% of participants)**

"Helping my mom out more with, uh, cleaning the house more, and you know, helping my sisters, playing with them, because that's usually my dad and my mom playing with them. But, like, when my mom's cooking and stuff, so I would play with them, and we would just talk and play around in our rooms and stuff."

– Toby

"I had to get up every morning with them. [...] I had to, like, get up. My mom always slept in because she has this sleeping problem, and we like—I always get up in the morning, feed and change them, and everything like that."

– Kathryn

"We've been helping—me and my brother have been helping around the house a lot more, doing a lot more stuff. [Interviewer: What sort of stuff?] Like, washing dishes, putting laundry away, um, putting laundry in the washer and dryer. We used to just do it a little, but now we do it, like, every day."

– Maddox

"Me and my brother, we had to do more work around the house and help my mom more. [...] We would just help mom clean and all that."

– Lamar

**2. Changes to everyday activities (33%)**

"Just like, kind of like, getting around, just like transportation was kind of different. Then, also, we—when he was gone, we used his car, and we got in a car wreck, so we had to get a new car, so that was kind of a change."

– Jerome

"I [usually] visit my dad every other weekend. [...] I go to, um, my grandma's house [now] instead of his to visit my sister."

– Lily, whose parents are divorced

"Well, when he was gone it was, like, it was really hard at first, but then, like, um, then I kept—I kept not thinking about him, just having fun, and I really couldn't do much stuff because my mom, she went to work every day and my older sister watched us. So, she went to work and she came back at like 4:00 o'clock, and so my curfew is like 9:00 so I can only do a little bit of stuff."

– Cooper

**3. More responsibilities for the at-home parent and caregivers (27%)**

"We had to get used to, like, uh, just like him being away. It was difficult because, like, my mom—I only had three siblings back then, and so it was hard for her to take care of all three of us at the same time."

– Isaac

"My, uh, mom has been hiring a lot of people to work on things in the house because we can't do it without any muscles. And, so far since he's been gone, everything has been rotting up, our bathroom, and our deck. We just lifted up our deck, and there was a whole bunch of crud and bugs and stuff. We have to hire people, so there's a lot of strangers."

– Gina

(continued)

**Table 1. (continued)****4. Missing family traditions (21%)**

"Well, we couldn't go on vacation that year because my dad usually drives and he knows the way."

– Cooper

"[My dad] likes to, like, scare people, so like, around Halloween and stuff when he's gone, we sometimes miss that, because, um, we always get my sister, like, really bad with him."

– Becky

**5. Emotional upheaval (18%)**

"My family has been kind of sad that my dad is deployed."

– James

"Sometimes it's like hard because like I keep stuff bottled up and then like everyone's like, 'Why aren't you talking and stuff?' And I'm just like, 'Just don't worry about it.'"

– Becky

**6. Family feels incomplete (15%)**

"It was kind of hard because, like, my friends would be, like, coming over and they would say, 'Where's your dad?' Cause my newer friends wouldn't know."

– Elizabeth

"We just like pick a night that we go out to eat, like random nights, and it's like weird because in the first few minutes we're like, 'Four people.' And then they're like, 'What? There's only three of you.' We're like, 'Oh no, sorry, only three.'"

– Becky

Well, my mom has to work early shifts, so we have to get up at six to go to my grandparents' house. So, that, and then we have to go to bed earlier because we have to get up earlier, too. And, it's just a change because it's just sad that he's gone, too.

Other youth mentioned having to restrict or eliminate extracurricular activities. Isaac noted transportation problems that prevented him from participating in after-school events:

We, um, we had to get used to, um, only having one driver to go—because with everywhere we had to go, it was hard with one driver. [. . .] Some activities we actually had to leave for a while. I was in Boy Scouts, but it just got too hard with everything, and so I left Boy Scouts. And, yeah, we stopped playing a lot of sports.

The responses in this category illustrated the many ways children's routines were altered.

Another theme involved *more responsibilities for the at-home parent and caregivers* (27%). Of course, many tasks fell to the at-home parent and older siblings to complete. Travis explained the change in his mother's role:

Yeah. My mom kind of took control of the house after he was gone because normally he would, but now she is. [Interviewer: How did you see that happen? How did she take control?] Well, instead of, you know, my dad being, you know, just coming home every day, she would be there like 24/7, and then, she would be the only person you can really go to and ask for help. [. . .] Like, say she would cook, you know, 24/7 and food would be different. [. . .] She would be cleaning more than, say, sitting down and watching TV or something like that.

James talked about how his brother assumed a leadership position in his family:

[We] made my oldest brother the father. That way, we could still have a normal life. [Interviewer: Ok. Have a normal life, what do you mean by that?] Like, since my dad has been gone, it's been hard on my mom to get stuff done, but since we've made, like, my oldest brother kind of the father, it's been, like, easier.

Youth recognized that they were not the only ones carrying a heavier load during deployment; they noted a myriad of new tasks completed by their family members.

Some participants described *missing family traditions* (21%). Nick's family spent less quality time together, "We had to actually change our ways, um, some days we didn't even do family day, the whole time our father was gone." Similarly, youth reported differences in milestone events, including vacations, holidays, and birthdays. Kayla said:

A lot of us have had birthdays and that's changed since he wasn't here, and what else changed is he's not here for the—the 4th of July with us. And, um, he's just—see, it kind of just seems different without him.

These statements depicted a sense of loss when traditions were disrupted during deployment.

*Emotional upheaval* was a fifth theme (18%). For example, Elizabeth and her sibling were overwhelmed by sadness, "When my brother and I were little we would cry every night because of him missing and we didn't know what was going on." Brittney described her brother's emotional problems:

My brother, he acts differently, like, he doesn't want to do anything, and he's always asking where my dad is because my brother—my dad—my dad has always been away. My dad left when my brother was 6 weeks old, so last year was the first year my brother spent with my dad, they really bonded, and now my brother is always asking where my dad is, and such.

This category underscored the negative feelings that emerged during deployment.

A final theme involved participants' comments that their *family feels incomplete* (15%). Toby felt the loss most acutely during mealtimes, "I mean, my sisters and all, they didn't like the whole thing about, like, there not being a person at the dinner table with them, you know. It would just be my mom, and me, and my sisters." Patrick also portrayed a hole in his family:

It was harder because there was no one there to hug while he was gone. [. . .] We, usually, we got to play baseball with my dad, but we couldn't at that time because he was gone, and the only thing when we got to see him was on Skype.

In sum, youth felt that their family was not fully intact during the deployment.

### **Biggest Challenges**

Interviewers introduced the topic of Research Question 2 by asking, "What was the biggest challenge your family went through during deployment?" (Table 2 contains additional quotations.) A first theme involved *disruptions to daily routines* (27%). For example, some participants mentioned transportation difficulties. Foster said:

Or like [my brother] has to go to a school event, and I have baseball that night, and they're at the same exact time. So usually we would have one of my coaches pick me up, so it's kind of hard then because, you know, the other coach had done a lot getting ready for the game and stuff like that, so we couldn't really reach him. [. . .] Well, my mom figured something out because my brother had, uh, graduation and I had a game. My mom dropped me off very early at [4:30]. I had to be there at 5:00, so she dropped me off at 4:30.

Maddox also noted problems with transportation:

**Table 2.** Challenges of Deployment.

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1. *Disruptions to daily routines* (mentioned by 27% of participants)  
 “Biggest challenge I think we had to go through was [. . .] honestly, I think it was just getting places because he was there for my little brother’s birth, but he actually left, like, a little bit after my little brother’s birth, so with a newborn baby in the house, it was just [difficult].”  
 – Isaac
- “There would be less money until he came back because he was gone on deployment.”  
 – Travis
2. *Emotional difficulties* (27%)  
 “I just think, I think, mother kind of feels more stress because he’s not there to help her with stuff, so she kind of feels she has to do it all on her own.”  
 – Jerome
3. *Missing the deployed family member* (21%)  
 “The biggest challenge is not being able to see him, like, on the weekends like I usually get to. We just see my stepmom—instead, so it’s kinda different with him not being there.”  
 – Alisa, whose parents are divorced
- “Yeah, and then there was the fact that he was just not there. [. . .] The man that, you know, you grew up with, you’re not gonna be seeing for, what, a year now. [. . .] Because, like, I mean, I’ve grown up with him my whole life, so then to have him not—like, a lot of kids are like, ‘Oh, you’ll be okay,’ but like, it’s gonna be different because, you know, you’re not gonna be seeing him for an entire year.”  
 – Travis
4. *Increased family conflict* (18%)  
 “Probably fighting. [. . .] Well, like it’s hard for my mom, because, like, we are fighting.”  
 – Juan
- “My sister; she’s been acting up a lot. [. . .] She acts up now. Even when my dad was here but it was easy for my dad to take control.”  
 – Finley
5. *Expanded responsibilities* (18%)  
 “My mom’s job. She’s an [account manager], so she works about—if she has the budget or taxes, she works from either 6:00 or 7:00 to about 11:00 at night. [. . .] Then I’m usually in charge since no one else is there.”  
 – Manuel
- 

Not being able to go to all the places we want to, because if mom goes to the store, she has to do it when she gets off of work, and when dad’s home he works in town, so all he has to do is really go from work to the store. Our mom works out of town, so it’s—it’s hard for us to really

do anything, and we're usually busy once mom gets home from work, because we're always—when she gets home, we're always, like, going to the store and picking up stuff for meals, or going to visit, um, my aunt and uncle and their kids.

Others referenced financial troubles. Joelle said, “Because my dad would go to work every day, and my mom didn't go to work every day, so it was a drop in the money.” This category indexed a host of disturbances to children's everyday lives, particularly transportation and finances.

*Emotional difficulties* constituted a second set of responses (27%). These comments emphasized anger, sadness, and stress. Elizabeth described her brother's struggles with negative emotion during the deployment and on the reunion day:

My little brother because he, like, um, he sort of gets mad. Like, he sort of shields himself; he doesn't talk about it. He, he sort of gets mad. The second time he deployed, that was—my brother and I were really little though, and he was always like, “I don't want to see daddy, I don't want to talk to daddy.” And then when my dad came home he was like, “I don't want to *see* daddy.” And my mom was yelling at him, and made, like, signs and he wouldn't hold it.

Other participants mentioned their mother's emotional turmoil. For example, Mary remarked, “Mom gets stressed out, and she's kind of not the same either. She has blow-ups more often, and she's not really understanding anymore, like she used to be.” A variety of negative emotions surfaced in participants' lives during deployment.

Of course, many participants identified *missing their deployed family member* as a challenge (21%). Jada said, “Not having my dad there. Like, I'm like a daddy's girl, and not having him there to hug and for him to mess around with me or taking me shooting, just like, personal stuff, kinda.” Toby grappled with several issues related to missing his father, including losing a confidant, fielding questions, and coping with the emotions of younger siblings:

Really, the biggest challenge was—was not having the full family that I talk to. I mean, it's like you know that there's someone missing from the family when you're, like, going out somewhere, and then it was challenging, for like, when people would ask “Where is your dad?”—you know? That was kind of hard to answer that. [. . .] Um, just the whole point of my sisters missing him, and asking for him every night, you know, wondering where he was, what he was doing. And then, it's

challenging for us, my mom and me, because we didn't know, you know, if he was gonna be okay or not, you know.

James lamented his father's absence during birthdays, "Probably like not being able to see our dad, like, on our birthdays and stuff." Not surprisingly, many youth commented that feeling lonesome for their deployed family member was a challenge.

Some children struggled with *increased family conflict* (18%) via comments that depicted overt disagreement. Patrick mentioned conflict with his brother, "Probably me and my brother changing because we always fought and it was just hard. [. . .] We just fought and fought and fought, and we never would quit." Some children identified their father as the peacekeeper in the family. For example, Cooper said, "The biggest challenge was, like, our dad held our family together, and not having, like, not having him here, sometimes my sister and my brother would get into fights and stuff. So, that was really bad." Kayla also portrayed her father as the family linchpin, "Probably working together. [. . .] Because he'd usually be there and he'd usually help us work together. But now he's gone and we don't always help each other." These comments illustrated how a family member's absence may spark tension and quarreling.

A final category identified *expanded responsibilities* as a challenging aspect of deployment (18%). Lamar's family had trouble staying on task with his father away, "It would probably be just keeping the house clean. [. . .] Yeah, because he would always remind us to keep stuff clean and all that." Arthur talked about maintaining the family swimming pool, "Probably keeping the pool to its regular level because he usually does that, and we didn't know how to." Becky dreaded her father's reaction to tasks not completed, "Getting our chores done so like when he comes back he's probably gonna, like, yell at us when we don't get our chores done or something." These added household obligations were a source of stress for youth.

### **Positive Outcomes**

Interviewers broached the topic of Research Question 3 by asking, "Did anything good or positive come from what your family went through during deployment?" (See Table 3 for additional examples.) Although some children said there were *no positive outcomes of deployment* (12%), others noted *increased family cohesion* (39%). Toby described bonding with his family:

**Table 3.** Opportunities of Deployment.1. *Increased family cohesion* (39%)

“Me and my brother didn’t fight as often.”

– Arthur

“[My mom] knows that we’re going through hard times and she always like comforts us and says that we are all okay and stuff like that.”

– Alisa

2. *Cultivating independence* (30%)

“Yes. I’ve been able to learn a lot more about, uh, taking care of yourself cause most of the time after school, once we get home, we stay by ourselves for, like, an hour or two until our mom gets home. So, it used to be that our dad would show up just like half an hour after we got home cause he gets off work right about the time we get off school. [. . .] So then, like, we usually wait for him to get home and then he would get us a snack cause, like, sometimes we’d be hungry. But now that he’s gone, we have changed—it’s changed and we have our own snacks set up so that if we’re hungry we just grab it; we know where it is.”

– Maddox

“My brother started being more independent.”

– Hugo

“I got an A in science.”

– Gina

3. *New or unique experiences as a military family* (15%)

“I think something great happened. Um, basically military kids get to do what other kids don’t get to. [Interviewer: Like what? How so?] We get to move around every three years. And we get to see other places and things.”

– Nick

4. *Being prepared for future deployments* (12%)

“We’re getting used to how he’s been gone, and he’s been in the military for 15 years, and so, he hasn’t been killed, so we know he’s not going to.”

– Foster

“[Now we know how to] get through the problems and all of the difficulties.”

– Nick

5. *No positive outcomes of deployment* (12%)

I think that we stuck together more, just like, my sisters, my mom, and me. I think that we got, like, really close, because you know, it was just us and anything could have happened to us while he was gone. So I mean, I guess it made us stick together more.

Kayla depicted how her family grew closer after an initial adjustment period, "Since the first couple weeks he was gone, it was hard to work together, but we're starting to try to be working together all the time." Foster's comment typified this theme, "We've gotten a lot more stronger."

A second response involved *cultivating independence* (30%). Such comments described how youth matured and developed. Travis said, "We all got a little more self-sufficient." Jada proudly told how she had grown:

We've all stepped up and started taking control, and we're improving in our home, and school, and work skills. [. . .] Now that I can actually sit home and watch my siblings my mom can work longer so she can get her work done. And then like, at school, um, I think I get gooder grades now.

Jerome relished one of his new chores, "I guess I kind of find it kind of fun to mow the lawn." Lamar summarized the point, "It gives you more strength to do stuff by yourself and all that."

Some participants mentioned enjoying *new or unique experiences as a military family* (15%). Elizabeth stated, "Being able to go to camps like this. [. . .] It's been fun to meet other kids who have had the same problems." James described special gifts from his father:

I mean we've got—had quite a few presents from Afghanistan. [. . .] Well we pretty much only get clothes from him, but they're like special clothes because these clothes that he gets and ships here, no one in our neighborhood has, so it's pretty much like, "Where did you get that T-shirt?" and "Well, it's from Afghanistan." [. . .] Yeah it means something when I wear it because it symbolizes the point, well my dad is gone.

Finley talked about the novelty of staying in touch with a family member overseas, "I have had the experience of having one parent. Also, by trying to communicate from a different area, it's a lot of fun—it's been somewhat kind of fun." These comments emphasized how being a member of a military family was a source of pride and distinction.

Finally, some participant identified *being prepared for future deployments* as a positive outcome (12%). Patrick remarked, "Yeah, because if he does leave again we'll know what's happening, and if, if anything, it is sad, but we did get through it, so we are happy, but it could have been worse." Brent described the confidence his family gained while his father was away, "[The deployment] was a little bit good, because, you know, we're used to it now,

so if he goes—if he goes again, then we'll know what it feels like.” These comments highlighted how youth felt better equipped to handle a subsequent separation.

## Discussion

Although deployment has important repercussions for children, surprisingly little is known about how youth experience family life during a tour of duty (Chandra, Lara-Cinisomo, et al., 2011; Lester et al., 2010; MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010). We drew on the relational turbulence model to delineate three key features of transitions: changes, challenges, and opportunities (see Figure 1). Military children who participated in qualitative interviews described changes to family life (Research Question 1), challenges of deployment (Research Question 2), and opportunities of deployment (Research Question 3). The findings shed light on the positive and negative consequences of deployment, illuminate the applicability of the relational turbulence model to this context, and suggest guidelines for enhancing children's resiliency during a tour of duty.

## Implications of the Results

The relational turbulence model argues that transitions are decisive periods because they are fraught with change (Solomon & Theiss, 2011; Solomon et al., 2010). Accordingly, the model implies that a prerequisite to understanding the trajectory of deployment involves generating insight into the changes children undergo when a service member is away. Youth reported (a) adopting more responsibilities, (b) grappling with shifts in daily routines, (c) watching their at-home parent and caregivers shoulder more responsibilities, (d) missing family traditions, (e) experiencing emotional turmoil, and (f) viewing their family as incomplete (Research Question 1). Our sample of early adolescents, a group facing the developmental tasks of building their social skills and constructing a unique identity (e.g., Fitzsimons & Krause-Parello, 2009; Pincus et al., 2001), were remarkably perceptive about how the tour of duty altered not only their own activities but the dynamics of their family as a whole (e.g., Lamar: “We'd go to the movies a lot more—because it keeps mom's mind off all the stuff.” James: “[We] made my oldest brother the father.” Isaac: “It was hard for [my mom] to take care of all three of us at the same time.”). These results offer a glimpse into the link between the welfare of caregivers and children. Indeed, a powerful predictor of youth adjustment during deployment is the resilience of at-home

caregivers (Chandra, Lara-Cinisomo, et al., 2010; Lester et al., 2010). Our participants were keenly mindful of the stressors that their caregivers faced, which may pave the way for the spillover of outcomes from adults to children.

According to the relational turbulence model, transitions can be tumultuous, demanding, and strenuous (Solomon & Theiss, 2011; Solomon et al., 2010). Extending the model's logic to this context implies that scholars and practitioners would benefit from in-depth knowledge of the difficulties children encounter during deployment. Interviewees described challenges such as (a) coping with disturbances to everyday activities, (b) encountering emotional problems, (c) feeling lonely for the deployed family member, (d) handling heightened family conflict, and (e) completing additional household chores (Research Question 2). These themes are striking for their wide scope and heterogeneous content: They encompass both implicit distress and overt disharmony, stem from both internal and external sources, and index cognitive, emotional, and behavioral stressors. More broadly, scholars seeking to explain precisely *why* deployment has detrimental effects on children's well-being may find this list helpful for indexing the pressures that may play a role (e.g., Barnes et al., 2007; Engel et al., 2010; Gorman et al., 2010).

The relational turbulence model also theorizes that transitions can foster vitality, stimulate growth, and strengthen bonds between people (Solomon & Theiss, 2011). This claim, when applied to youth during deployment, underscores the imprudence of overlooking constructive outcomes. Children depicted several benefits of deployment: (a) cultivating family cohesion, (b) building independence, (c) enjoying novel activities as a member of a military family, and (d) being prepared for future deployments (Research Question 3). Because prior research has tended to privilege risk rather than resilience (MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010; Park, 2011; but see Lester et al., 2011), our findings are among the first to illuminate children's positive outcomes in their own words. Youth took pride in deepening family ties, in developing autonomy, and in being a member of a military family. These results offer a starting point for helping children frame their deployment experiences in terms of strengths rather than deficiencies (e.g., Houston et al., 2009).

### *Limitations and Contributions of the Findings*

Several limitations of our study are important to acknowledge. First, children were recruited from a residential summer camp. The tuition-free camp was open to youth from all socioeconomic backgrounds, but our findings may not reflect the perspectives of families who were unable or unwilling to send

their children to camp (e.g., Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2012). Another sampling limitation involves the branches of military service reflected in the data: Approximately 88% of participants were children of U.S. Army or Army National Guard service members. Accordingly, our results may not depict youth from Air Force, Air National Guard, Navy, or Marine families. A third shortcoming is that some children's experiences may not have been fresh in their minds because reunion had occurred quite a bit prior to their interview. Thus, the comments they supplied to our data set are subject to the constraints of retrospective recall.

Despite these limitations, our study advances theory by suggesting that the relational turbulence model is germane to the experiences of children during deployment. Although "the lack of explicit theory is conspicuous" in this literature (Park, 2011, p. 69), some scholars have relied on life course theory, family stress theory, and stage models of deployment (MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010). Our results imply that the relational turbulence model has value for understanding how youth navigate a family member's tour of duty.

### *Recommendations for Practice and Directions for Future Research*

Our data also highlight recommendations for practice. Of course, children may fare better during deployment if they are knowledgeable about the changes to family life that may arise. Youth who are prepared to shoulder new responsibilities, accommodate shifts in everyday routines, and be flexible about family traditions may handle deployment more effectively than those who are caught off-guard by the changes (Research Question 1). At-home parents, too, may boost children's resilience by preserving daily routines and comforting activities (e.g., Call & Mortimer, 2001), providing an outlet to express challenging emotions, and helping youth maintain regular contact with the deployed family member (Research Question 2). On the other side of the coin, children who focus on the positive outcomes of deployment may be better able to make sense of their experiences (e.g., Houston et al., 2009; Lester et al., 2011). Indeed, research suggests that reframing situations in a positive light can be a valuable coping mechanism for adolescents (e.g., Ebata & Moos, 1991). Hence, we see utility in helping youth chart their growth during deployment by noting instances of family solidarity and individual maturation (Research Question 3).

Other recommendations for practice stem from specific themes. For example, several participants noted that transportation problems prevented them from taking advantage of community resources (e.g., Isaac: "I was in

Boy Scouts, but it just got too hard with everything, and so I left Boy Scouts. And, yeah, we stopped playing a lot of sports.”). To combat the irony that the military families who most need support may be least equipped to capitalize on social programs, administrators should think creatively about how to involve children who would be unable to participate otherwise (e.g., ridesharing, public transportation vouchers). A second guideline is that at-home caregivers should assign only age-appropriate responsibilities. Youth who are expected to assume an adult role in the family may struggle under the pressure (e.g., Jada: “I had to step up and become like the new dad.”). A final recommendation is to build on children’s pride over becoming more self-sufficient during deployment (e.g., Maddox: “I’ve been able to learn a lot more about, uh, taking care of yourself.”). As Park (2011) noted, interventions for military children have been dominated by a problem-based approach rather than a strength-based approach. Our data may prove useful for helping parents, caregivers, teachers, and practitioners accentuate children’s growth during a family member’s deployment.

Our findings point to several directions for future research. One task is to examine how children’s experiences of deployment may vary according to demographic attributes such as age (e.g., Park, 2011) and the service member’s military status (Chandra, Burns, et al., 2011). For example, infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and school-aged children may respond very differently to deployment than the early adolescents we interviewed, who in turn, are likely to have very different needs compared to teenagers and young adults (Fitzsimons & Krause-Parello, 2009; Pincus et al., 2001). Other findings hint that children of active duty personnel report more worry about their at-home caregiver, and children of reserve component personnel report that their friends and teachers do not understand military life (Chandra et al., 2008). Consequently, work is needed to compare children’s experiences across both age cohorts and military cohorts.

Another agenda item is to delve more deeply into the theorizing of the relational turbulence model in this context. The model proposes that individuals experience upheaval during times of transition for two reasons (Solomon et al., 2010): (a) they are unsure about their relationships (labeled *relational uncertainty*), and (b) they experience frequent disruptions to their everyday routines (labeled *interference from partners*). Accordingly, a next step is to evaluate whether children’s experiences of relational uncertainty and interference from partners are linked to the challenges and opportunities they face during deployment (e.g., Knobloch & Theiss, 2011). A related task is to track children before, during, and after a family member’s tour of duty. Indeed, longitudinal research is essential for

illuminating how youth experience the deployment cycle over time (e.g., Chandra, Lara-Cinisomo, et al., 2011).

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Wiens and Boss (2006) noted, "To understand how best to support today's military families, it is essential to understand their contexts. What are the contextual sources of their stress and resiliency?" (p. 25). This chapter takes up that question.

Our goal is to demonstrate ways that scholars of close relationships can better tailor their work to the hallmarks of military culture. We begin by describing features of US military culture that provide a milieu for the relationships among service members, their romantic partners, and their children. Then, we review four theories of close relationships that are germane to military couples and families. We explicate the main premises of each theory and describe empirical investigations of them in the military context. We conclude by assessing the state of the literature and identifying how the theories can be more responsive to features of military culture.

#### US MILITARY CULTURE AS A BACKDROP FOR FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

"Be all you can be." "Army strong." "Called to duty, boots on the ground." "This we'll defend." "Duty, honor, country." "A global force for good." "Not for ourselves, but for our country." "Honor, courage, commitment." "Aim high." "Do something amazing." "Above all." "Integrity first, service before self, and excellence in all we do." "The proud." "Always faithful." "To lead by example." Although civilians may have only passing familiarity with these mission statements and recruitment messages, many active duty and reserve component military families have adopted them as words to live by (e.g., Hall, 2008; 2011b; Ulmer et al., 2000). Of course, military culture runs far deeper than catchy slogans or even time-honored mottos.

*Military culture* refers to "how things are done in a military organization. It consists of the accepted values, philosophies, traditions, and customs that are passed along to each successive generation of service members to create a shared professional ethos" (Ulmer et al., 2000, p. 7). Military culture not only stems from the US Constitution and national and international law, but also emerges from the customs, procedures, and practices that have evolved over the course of the nation's history (Collins, 1998; Howard, 2006; Ulmer et al., 2000). Military culture can be divided (quite arbitrarily) into an array of core themes, but its primary components include (a) a warrior identity, (b) an authoritarian structure, (c) an overriding commitment to the mission, (d) geographic mobility and periodic separations, and (e) the perpetual risk of disaster, injury, and death. We devote the following subsections to describing how these aspects of military culture encircle and influence the relationships among service members, their romantic partners, and their children.

### Family relationships embedded in United States military culture

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United States military personnel and their families have made substantial sacrifices to protect and defend their country in the service of the post-9/11 global war on terrorism (MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010; Willerton, MacDermid Wadsworth, and Riggs, 2011). Service members, their romantic partners, and their children have handled the increased operational tempo of deployments resulting from both Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) with impressive resilience (Bonanno et al., 2012; Cozza, Chun, and Polo, 2005; Lester et al., 2010), although the challenges of war can take a substantial toll on people's physical health (Badr, Barker, and Milbury, 2011; Gorman, Eide, and Hilse-Gorman, 2010), mental health (Mansfield et al., 2010; Milliken, Auchterlonie, and Hoge, 2007; Pfefferbaum et al., 2011), and relationship health (Adams, Durand, and Castro, 2006; Allen et al., 2010; Nelson Goff et al., 2007). One foundation of this resilience is undoubtedly the strong military identity that many families embrace. US military culture espouses the ideals of courage, fortitude, strength, fairness, discipline, loyalty, respect for authority, determination, and valor (Coll, Weiss, and Yarvis, 2011; Greene et al., 2010b; Ulmer, Collins, and Jacobs, 2000), and these qualities are the signature values of many active duty and reserve component military families (Hall, 2008). To be a US military family is to be proud, to be strong, and to be brave (Hall 2011a; 2011b; Park, 2011).

Although military culture provides a pervasive backdrop for how service members and their families navigate domestic life (Hall 2008; 2011a; Sherman and Bowling, 2011), scholarship on the interpersonal functioning of military couples and families has not always been sensitive to the unique parameters at play. With some notable exceptions (Palmer, 2008; Pincus et al., 2001; Riggs and Riggs, 2011), scholars have tended to apply established theories of relationship functioning to the military context without fully taking into account the social circumstances that envelop military personnel, their romantic partners, and their children. The result is a body of work (including some of our own research) that underemphasizes the distinctive trademarks of military life. As

### Warrior identity

First and foremost, military culture is marked by a *warrior identity* (Dunivin, 1994; Greene et al., 2010b; Hall, 2011b). The main mission of the military is combat, of course, which permeates all aspects of military life (Dunivin, 1994; Ulmer et al., 2000). Military personnel are expected to uphold the persona of a warrior identity, including loyalty, discipline, strength, self-sacrifice, and courage (Collins, 1998; Hall, 2011a; Reger et al., 2008). A warrior ethos provides many service members with a sense of purpose, a distinctive identity, and an honor-based code of values (Hall, 2011a). Whereas military culture embodies the ideals of solidarity and self-sacrifice, civilian culture embraces the ideals of liberty and autonomy (Collins, 1998). Consequently, the warrior identity adopted by military personnel and their family members often is at odds with the individualistic proclivity of civilian life (Collins, 1998; Hall, 2008; 2011a).

Closely tied to the warrior identity is the masculine orientation of military culture (Dunivin, 1994), whereby individuals are expected to project stoicism, hide weakness, maintain secrecy, and deny fear (Hall, 2011b; Langston, Gould, and Greenberg, 2007). Historically, the military has been a male-dominated profession, and although women are joining the military and rising through the leadership ranks more than ever (Kelty, Kleykamp, and Segal, 2010), women face the added pressure of proving their capability in the midst of the masculine atmosphere (Collins, 1998; Dunivin, 1994). Women may have difficulty negotiating their gender identity as they move forward in their military career (Kelty et al., 2010; Silva, 2008) while balancing their roles as service members, spouses, and mothers (Goodman et al., 2013). More generally, the masculine focus of military culture can pose difficulty for families who are expected to handle strain by avoiding outward displays of emotion, adopting rigid boundaries around private information, and disavowing difficulties (Hall, 2011a). Military families who take this approach to problem solving may be reluctant to seek help when they need it (Langston et al., 2007), thereby leaving serious health issues such as mental illness (Gorman et al., 2011; Hoge et al., 2004; Kim et al., 2010) and substance abuse (Skidmore and Roy, 2011) unaddressed.

The warrior identity that forms the backbone of military culture, together with the related norms of masculinity and stoicism, requires military families to meet different standards for behavior compared to their civilian counterparts. Spouses and children are expected to maintain the appearance of strength and to adhere to the standards of excellence championed by military culture (Kelty et al., 2010). Spouses and children who engage in problematic behavior can damage the reputation of the service member, which may make it harder for the service member to obtain promotions, secure desired relocations, and retain the trust of colleagues (Everson and Camp, 2011; Hall, 2008). Of course, military families may experience considerable stress as they navigate the roles and expectations of a warrior identity (Hall, 2011a; 2011b).

### Authoritarian structure

Military culture also is imbued with an *authoritarian structure*. The military operates via a rank hierarchy whereby service members obey their superiors and honor the chain of command (Hall, 2008; 2011a; 2011b). Respect for authority is a central feature of military life, which allows leaders to maintain order, to execute missions without question or discord, and to ensure that service members work together for a common purpose (e.g., Greene et al., 2010b; Reger et al., 2008; Ulmer et al., 2000). The authoritarian structure distributes power and responsibility by rank rather than by age, education, or experience (Reger et al., 2008). Both military personnel and family life scholars have noted, quite ironically, that service members risk their lives to preserve democracy across the globe but do not practice it within their organization (Hall, 2008).

The authoritarian structure is embodied in a class system divided into enlisted versus officer cohorts, with variations in rank within cohorts. Life on a military base, camp, or installation can reflect this stratified system in housing, infrastructure, leisure pursuits, and patterns of socializing (Hall, 2008; 2011a; 2011b). Whereas esprit de corps may be pervasive within rank, segregation may be the norm across rank. Family members from different cohorts may be discouraged from mingling across division lines; Hall (2008) pointed to the tendency of enlisted personnel's children to play football versus officers' children to play tennis as an example of this divide. Another example is that wives of high-ranking officers are expected to volunteer their time freely and shoulder a disproportionate load of service responsibilities (Everson and Herzog, 2011; Kelty et al., 2010).

Some military families may mindfully or reflexively adopt an authoritarian structure at home as well (Hall, 2008; 2011a; 2011b). Families with a rank-based orientation to domestic life may opt for autocratic parenting practices with limited tolerance for individualism. Children learn to respect their elders, defer to authority, refrain from questioning leadership, use formal forms of address ("yes, sir," "yes, ma'am"), and keep their belongings neat and tidy. Adolescents and teenagers who live off-base or attend civilian schools may find it difficult to reconcile their rigid family structure with the more permissive lifestyle of their civilian peers (Hall, 2011a; 2011b); some may rebel against their parents after becoming acquainted with alternative family structures (Hall, 2008).

### Primacy of the mission

Another hallmark of military culture is the *primacy of the mission*. Military service demands a total commitment to operational activities (Greene et al., 2010b; Ulmer et al., 2000). A mission-first mantra unites service members around a common purpose and infuses their work with shared meaning (Hall, 2008; Reger et al., 2008). Individuals who hope to succeed in military life are

expected to put their assignments ahead of other priorities. An all-encompassing focus on the mission may translate into long hours devoted to intense training, preserving physical fitness, building unit cohesion, cultivating operational readiness, and completing work tasks (Hall, 2008; 2011a; 2011b). The demands of the mission are unquestionably challenging for enlisted personnel and officers alike (e.g., Coll et al., 2011).

A service member's dedication to the mission provides his or her family with an admirable example of hard work, discipline, and perseverance. At the same time, however, a service member's unwavering commitment to operational duties may be a source of disconnect for families. Service members may quite naturally develop a "military second family" (Hall, 2008, p. 53) through shared experiences and allegiance to a common goal. The strong bonds that military personnel form with others assigned to the same mission may lead to an emotional triangle among service members, their domestic family, and their military second family (Hall, 2008; 2011a; 2011b). Service members, their romantic partners, and their children may experience stress as they attempt to make sense of their roles, particularly if service members feel compelled to put the mission ahead of their domestic family's needs (e.g., Everson and Camp, 2011; Goodman et al., 2013; Greene et al., 2010b).

#### Geographic mobility and periodic separations

*Geographic mobility* is a way of life for active duty military families. Serial relocations to both national and international destinations require active duty military families to uproot their lives in service to their country (e.g., Burrell et al., 2006; Segal, 1986; Wertsch, 1991). These relocations can occur every two to four years or less depending on the branch and rank of the service member. Although serial relocations offer military families the prospect of diverse opportunities, worldly experiences, and exciting adventures, they also present challenges for service members, their romantic partners, and their children (Burrell et al., 2006). With each move, family members have to adjust to a new living situation, develop a new support system, and transition to new work and school environments (Sherman and Bowling, 2011). Civilian spouses may have difficulty advancing their own careers amidst the transience (Kelty et al., 2010), and children may lack opportunities to build sustained connections with peers, teachers, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and other extended family members. Active duty military families may hesitate to put down roots in any particular place, which could lead to feelings of isolation, alienation, and detachment from the community (Hall, 2008). This lack of belongingness may be amplified during relocations overseas if family members are not familiar with the language, culture, and customs of their new home (Hall 2011a; 2011b). Indeed, research conducted with Army spouses demonstrates that the demands of geographic mobility are negatively associated with

their satisfaction with Army life, and the demands of living internationally are negatively associated with their physical and psychological well-being (Burrell et al., 2006).

In addition to geographic mobility, the military lifestyle also involves *periodic separations* from loved ones. Service members may be called away from their families for activities such as field-training exercises, drill periods, educational opportunities, and deployments for peacekeeping or combat operations. These recurring assignments away from home mean that military families negotiate repeated cycles of departure, separation, and reunion (e.g., Adams et al., 2005; Everson, Herzog, and Haigler, 2011; Merolla, 2010). Deployments, in particular, present special hardships (Laser and Stephens, 2011; Sheppard, Malatras, and Israel, 2010). Service members are absent for holidays, birthdays, and special occasions, at-home romantic partners take sole responsibility for running the household and caring for children, and youth adjust to new routines and responsibilities (Knobloch, Pusateri et al., in press b; Maguire, Heinemann-LaFave, and Sahlstein, 2013; Sahlstein, Maguire, and Timmerman, 2009). Technological advances mean more opportunities for families to connect during deployments (Greene et al., 2010a), but family members may still feel detached and isolated from each other (e.g., Joseph and Afifi, 2010; Lowe et al., 2012; Newby et al., 2005). Reunion brings additional changes as the returning service member is reintegrated into the family system (Knobloch, Pusateri et al., in press a; Sayers, 2011). All members of military families face the task of renegotiating their roles in light of the changes that occurred during deployment (Bowling and Sherman, 2008). Not surprisingly, evidence shows that deployments can be physically and emotionally challenging for all members of military families (Chandra, Burns, Tanielian, and Jaycox, 2011; Gorman et al., 2010; Mansfield et al., 2010; McNulty, 2005).

#### Risk of disaster, injury, and death

An ominous feature of military culture is the inherent risk of *disaster, injury, and death*. Military service, at its core, requires personnel to put themselves in harm's way (Greene et al., 2010b; Hall, 2008; Segal, 1986). Service members, their romantic partners, and their children are confronted with the ever-present possibility of trauma, most clearly during warzone deployments, but also during field-training exercises, humanitarian relief efforts, and peacekeeping operations (Burrell et al., 2006; Hall, 2008). Military culture is indelibly marked by the prospect that service members may be called on to sacrifice their lives or limbs in service to their country (Gottman, Gottman, and Atkins, 2011; Hall 2011a; 2011b). Although many military families calmly accept the risk of danger as a necessary byproduct of their service for the common good, individuals with substantial anxiety about the service member's well-being experience poorer physical and emotional health (e.g., Burrell et al., 2006; Flake et al., 2009).

To this point, we have described five key elements of military culture that animate the relationships among service members and their families: (a) a warrior identity, (b) an authoritarian structure, (c) the primacy of the mission, (d) geographic mobility and periodic separations, and (e) the risk of disaster, injury, and death. Implicit in our review is a paradox about the military lifestyle. On one hand, military culture can be a source of strength and support for service members, their romantic partners, and their children (Kelty et al., 2010; Sherman and Bowling, 2011). Military service provides job security, educational opportunities, a cohesive and stable environment for domestic life, and a profound sense of purpose, all of which can foster resilience in military families. On the other hand, military culture can engender enormous stressors that take a toll on people's physical, emotional, and relational well-being (e.g., Burrell et al., 2006; Hall, 2008; Sherman and Bowling, 2011). We invite our readers to keep these aspects of military culture in mind as we turn our attention to summarizing theory-driven work on the relationship functioning of military families.

#### THEORIES OF RELATIONSHIP FUNCTIONING APPLIED TO MILITARY FAMILIES

The warrant for this chapter rests on the premise that scholarship on the interpersonal relationships of military families would benefit from more emphasis on attributes of the external context. Although a sizeable portion of research on military families is descriptive rather than theoretically driven (Park, 2011), a growing body of work has employed established theories of close relationships to understand the dynamics of military families. We focus on four theories that have spawned a corpus of empirical research on military personnel and their families: attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982), family stress theory (Hill, 1949; McCubbin and Patterson, 1983a; 1983b), ambiguous loss frameworks (Boss, 1999; 2006), and the relational turbulence model (Knobloch and Theiss, 2012; 2014). All four theories have been applied to a variety of relationship domains and processes, but only family stress theory and its kin, ambiguous loss frameworks, have their genesis in the military arena.

#### Attachment theory

Attachment theory argues that people's relational history shapes how they regulate stress, view relationships, and behave in interpersonal situations (Bowlby, 1973; 1980; 1982; Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007). According to the theory, infants are born with a strong drive to maintain proximity to their caregivers, who in turn are equipped to provide infants with comfort in times of distress and a safe haven for exploring the environment. The quality of caregiving provided by these attachment figures varies in helpfulness, however, and some children

benefit from consistent support while others receive only intermittent or limited support from their caregivers. Children internalize their early experiences with their attachment figures to develop *internal working models* of relationships, which they rely on to make sense of the interpersonal relationships they engage in throughout their lives.

An *attachment style* (or *orientation*) indexes a person's expectations for relationships that stem from his or her previous experiences with caregivers (Brennan, Clark, and Shaver, 1998; Mikulincer and Shaver, 2007). An individual's attachment style is the product of two dimensions. *Attachment avoidance* refers to the extent to which individuals prefer to be independent rather than dependent on a partner; *attachment anxiety* refers to the extent to which people question whether their partner will offer support when needed. Crossing the two dimensions produces four attachment styles: fearful, dismissive, preoccupied, and secure. Individuals with a *fearful* attachment style are high in both avoidance and anxiety; they feel undeserving of affection and have difficulty depending on others. People with a *dismissive* attachment style are high in avoidance but low in anxiety; they eschew close relationships in favor of cultivating their independence. Those with a *preoccupied* attachment style are low in avoidance but high in anxiety; they desire closeness but find it hard to trust partners. Finally, individuals with a *secure* attachment style are low in both avoidance and anxiety; they are comfortable trusting others and forming close relationships.

Deployment to warzones and exposure to combat are likely to trigger the attachment system of military family members (Basham, 2008; Miller, Miller, and Bjorklund, 2010; Posada et al., 2011). Accordingly, people's attachment orientation is likely to govern their emotional responses and coping strategies during deployment (Riggs and Riggs, 2011). Whereas securely attached individuals may be resilient in the face of deployment-related separations, insecurely attached people may encounter substantial stress, and avoidantly attached individuals may cope using disengaging and distancing strategies (Cafferty et al., 1994; Riggs and Riggs, 2011). Upon reunion, people without secure attachment may react with ambivalence, resentment, neediness, fear of rejection, and/or withdrawal (Riggs and Riggs, 2011; Vormbrock, 1993). The attachment style of adults also may lay a foundation for the well-being of their offspring. Indeed, children's adjustment across the deployment cycle may be rooted in how the at-home partner copes with the separation (Medway et al., 1995; Riggs and Riggs, 2011).

*Empirical investigations.* A robust body of work has examined attachment styles as a predictor of the resilience, mental health, and coping of military personnel. For example, military recruits with secure attachment may adjust to combat training more effectively than recruits with avoidant or ambivalent attachment (Mikulincer and Florian, 1995). Moreover, military veterans and former prisoners of war with insecure attachment report more debilitating symptoms of posttraumatic stress compared to those with secure attachment

(Dieperink et al., 2001; Ghafoori et al., 2008; Renaud, 2008; Zakin, Solomon, and Neria, 2003). People's attachment style also may help them handle war trauma. Among military veterans experiencing posttraumatic stress symptoms, those high in attachment anxiety are likely to experience sleep problems, but those high in attachment avoidance are less vulnerable to sleep problems, possibly because of their orientation toward independence (Troxel and Germain, 2011). Military personnel with secure attachment who endured war captivity exhibit better long-term adjustment than those with anxious or avoidant attachment (Solomon et al., 1998). Combat veterans with a preoccupied attachment style, in particular, are less responsive to clinical treatments for posttraumatic stress disorder than combat veterans with other attachment styles (Forbes et al., 2010). This work implies that a person's attachment style may be a key risk or resilience factor for dealing with the stress of military service.

Notably fewer studies have employed attachment theory to understand the interpersonal dynamics of military couples and families. Medway and colleagues (1995) examined the outcomes of war-related separation on reserve component families. Findings indicated that the degree of attachment security at-home mothers reported was negatively associated with (a) their own experience of stress during deployment and reunion, and (b) children's behavioral problems during reunion. More recently, Ein-Dor and colleagues (2010) evaluated attachment as a predictor of posttraumatic and secondary stress symptoms among Israeli war veterans and their wives. Their data suggested spillover effects: husbands' attachment anxiety was positively associated with wives' secondary stress symptoms, and husbands' attachment avoidance was negatively associated with wives' secondary stress symptoms. Frey and colleagues (2011) collected data from twenty couples who had experienced deployment. They also found spillover effects in the associations that people's attachment anxiety shared with their partner's reports of domestic violence. All three studies demonstrate how the attachment orientation of one military family member has implications for the well-being of other family members.

#### Family stress theory

Family stress theory, which stems from Hill's (1949) seminal analysis of 135 military families separated and reunited during World War II, illuminates how families respond to stressful situations (see also Hill, 1958). Hill proposed the ABCX model where *A* represents an unexpected precipitating event that has the potential to spark hardships for the family (e.g., deployment, job loss, illness). *B* indexes the resources available to the family for coping with the precipitating event (e.g., strength of the bonds within the family, supportive relatives, childcare options). *C* denotes the meaning that family members attribute to the event (e.g., interpretation of the circumstances, judgments of efficacy, appraisals of the situation as a challenge versus an opportunity). Family

stress theory argues that the event (*A*) interacts with a family's resources (*B*) and cognitions (*C*) to govern the magnitude of the crisis, *X*, defined as the degree of disruption the family experiences in response to the event. Accordingly, the theory takes into account both internal and external family parameters to explain why some families are resilient in the face of stressful events and other families are propelled into crisis.

The *double ABCX model*, advanced by McCubbin and Patterson (1983a; 1983b; Patterson and McCubbin, 1984), expanded family stress theory by considering post-event factors that may govern how family adaptation unfolds over time. McCubbin and Patterson (1983a; 1983b) based their model on longitudinal findings from their study of 216 military families in which the husband was reported missing or held captive during the Vietnam War. The double ABCX model recognizes that families may encounter pile-ups of additional stressors and obstacles that occur on top of the initial precipitating event. According to the model, the family's ability to cope with the circumstances is a function of the pile-up of stressors (*aA*), the new and existing resources available to the family (*bB*), and the appraisals the family makes of the event (*cC*). All three factors contribute to how well the family adapts to the situation (*xX*). McCubbin and Patterson's (1983a; 1983b) double ABCX model, like Hill's (1949) ABCX model, originated in the context of military families but has been widely applied to other family situations.

Family stress theory has provided a foundation for two other frameworks tailored to the domain of military life. One is the *contextual/family stress model*, which accentuates the multilayered contexts that surround military families (Boss, 2002; Boss et al., 2003; Wiens and Boss, 2006). At its core, the contextual family stress model argues that military families are embedded in external and internal contexts that shape how individuals make sense of stressful situations such as deployment. A family's *external context* encompasses four factors outside the family's control that contribute to how people handle stress (Wiens and Boss, 2006). The external context includes *historical parameters* (e.g., previous separations, events leading up to the current deployment), *economic parameters* (e.g., earning more money or less money during deployment, taking a leave of absence from a job to care for children), *developmental parameters* (e.g., stage of the family life cycle, such as being newly married, preparing to launch children from the home, caring for elderly parents), and *cultural parameters* (e.g., ethnic membership, military identity, majority or minority status). The family's *internal context* reflects the inner life of the family and contains three factors that are controllable by the members. The internal context includes *structural parameters* (e.g., rules, roles, boundaries), *psychological parameters* (e.g., appraisals, perceptions, and assessments of stressful episodes), and *philosophical parameters* (e.g., values, beliefs, spirituality). A strength of the contextual family stress model is that it identifies factors to account for why some military families (even those from the same

unit) may struggle during deployment while others are resilient during a tour of duty.

The *expanded double ABCX model of adjustment for deployment*, advanced by Huebner (2009), integrates principles from family stress theory with principles from attachment theory to explain how military families cope with deployment. The expanded model defines stressors (A) as the transitions that occur across the cycle of deployment (e.g., pre-deployment, separation, reunion) as well as the normative changes that occur across the family life cycle (e.g., stage of marriage, birth of children, aging parents). It characterizes resources (B) as military and civilian support mechanisms as well as the attachment security of family members. The model considers cognitions (C) as appraisals of the situation as well as the internal working models of relationships held by family members. Finally, the model emphasizes adaptation to deployment (X) as a function of stressors, resources, and appraisals. Huebner's (2009) expanded model positions people's attachment orientation as a frame that guides how they make sense of deployment (manageable challenge or insurmountable crisis?) and whether they are willing to take advantage of the available resources (will programs be helpful, useless, or harmful?). With respect to intervention, the expanded model suggests that family life practitioners need to be sensitive to people's attachment orientation when constructing and implementing support activities.

*Empirical investigations.* Family stress theory and its constellation of related frameworks have been useful for understanding how service members, their romantic partners, and their children cope (or fail to cope) with the demands of military life (e.g., Everson et al., 2013; Figley, 1993; Gibbons, Barnett, and Hickling, 2012). A direct test of the double ABCX model, involving eighty-two Navy wives who experienced an eight-month deployment, revealed that the most resilient wives coped by accepting the military lifestyle and being optimistic about the future (Patterson and McCubbin, 1984). More recently, family stress theory has illuminated how active duty single parents adjust to the demands of military life (Bowen, Orthner, and Zimmerman, 1993), how military adolescents adapt to frequent relocations (Pittman and Bowen, 1994), how exposure to violence before enlistment predicts the likelihood that Army recruits will be discharged before completing basic training (Chapin, 2004), how at-home Army spouses cope with parenting stress during deployment (Everson et al., 2013), and how family stress corresponds with symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder among deployed military personnel (Gibbons et al., 2012).

#### Ambiguous loss frameworks

Ambiguous loss frameworks, which are rooted in family stress theory, emphasize the uncertainty that military families face due to work-related separations and deployments (Boss, 1999; 2002; 2006). *Boundary ambiguity* occurs when

individuals are unsure about roles, tasks, and membership in the family (Faber et al., 2008; Huebner et al., 2007; Wiens and Boss, 2006); military families are likely to experience boundary ambiguity if service members make frequent exits from and entries into domestic life. Indeed, the demands of military life bring numerous occasions for long-distance separations, which parallel the distinction between normative life stressors versus catastrophic life stressors (McCubbin and Figley, 1983; Peebles-Kleiger and Kleiger, 1994). Whereas routine peacekeeping missions and scheduled training exercises may be akin to normative life stressors because the separations tend to have a definite location and a planned timetable, combat-related deployments may be akin to catastrophic life stressors because the location and duration of the missions tend to be ambiguous (Peebles-Kleiger and Kleiger, 1994; Wiens and Boss, 2006). Indeed, combat-related deployments mean that individuals may not know how long they have to prepare for the separation, where the service member will be stationed, what duties he or she will be assigned, when he or she will leave, or when he or she will return (Wiens and Boss, 2006). Hence, boundary ambiguity is likely to arise for both adults (Faber et al., 2008; Wiens and Boss, 2006) and children (Huebner et al., 2007) when military personnel receive deployment orders.

Combat-related deployments and reunions may spark *ambiguous loss*, which occurs when people experience a separation or loss tied to uncertain, indefinite, or equivocal circumstances (Boss, 1999, 2006; Huebner et al., 2007; Wiens and Boss, 2006). Ambiguous loss exists in two forms. *Ambiguous presence* occurs when a person is physically present but family members perceive him or her to be psychologically absent ("here but not here"). In contrast, *ambiguous absence* occurs when a person is physically absent but family members perceive him or her to be psychologically present ("there but not there"). Both forms of ambiguous loss are helpful for understanding military deployments and reunions because they call attention to both the separation and people's appraisals of the separation (Faber et al., 2008; see also Campbell and Demi, 2000; Huebner et al., 2007).

*Empirical investigations.* A handful of studies have examined people's experiences of boundary ambiguity and ambiguous loss across the deployment cycle. For example, Wiens and Boss (2006) interviewed Army National Guard spouses whose partners had deployed and returned from a peacekeeping mission. They found that the pre-deployment stage was marked by ambiguous presence and emotional detachment: At-home spouses were motivated to spend quality time together, but service members were preoccupied with preparing and training for the mission. In contrast, the deployment stage was characterized by ambiguous absence and a drive for connection: family members experienced a strong desire to stay in touch, and they relied on direct communication with each other (cards, letters, email, Skype) and indirect ways of establishing presence (looking at pictures, reliving memories) to bridge the distance. The

reunion stage was defined by a shift to ambiguous presence: returning service members had formed strong bonds with comrades from their unit and felt distant from their families, at-home spouses had developed smooth routines that were disrupted, and family members struggled to reconnect and reestablish intimacy.

In an investigation elaborating on these ideas, Faber and colleagues (2008) interviewed thirty-four Army reservists and family members seven times in the year after service members had returned from a tour of duty in Iraq. During deployment, family members reported boundary ambiguity about the safety of the service member, the best ways to redistribute roles and responsibilities, and how to prepare for reunion. Family members managed their sense of ambiguous absence by seeking information from the media and soliciting comfort from support groups. During reunion, family members experienced boundary ambiguity about how to resume roles, how to communicate more openly with each other, and how to help the returning service member transition from military life to civilian life. They coped with their sense of ambiguous presence by problem solving with each other and communicating with social network members who understood their circumstances. These findings, coupled with those of Wiens and Boss (2006), highlight the relevance of boundary ambiguity and ambiguous loss to military families across the deployment cycle.

#### Relational turbulence model

The relational turbulence model considers how people navigate times of transition within close relationships (Solomon and Knobloch, 2004; Solomon, Weber, and Steuber, 2010). The model characterizes a *transition* as a transformative moment in the development of a relationship that has the potential to spur growth or decline (Knobloch, 2007); it defines *relational turbulence* as a state of dyadic turmoil in which people react strongly to episodes that would be relatively commonplace if the relationship was not in the throes of a transition (Solomon and Theiss, 2011).

The theory argues that transitions are likely to be turbulent because they evoke questions about the nature of the relationship and trigger disruptions to daily routines (Solomon and Knobloch, 2004; Solomon and Theiss, 2011). More succinctly, the theory delineates relational uncertainty and interference from partners as two mechanisms of turbulence when relationships are in flux. *Relational uncertainty* refers to people's confidence or lack of confidence in their perceptions of involvement within a relationship (Knobloch, 2010; Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, and Theiss, 2013). *Interference from partners* occurs when an individual's everyday goals are disrupted by a partner (Knobloch and Solomon, 2004). The relational turbulence model argues that people's experiences of upheaval during times of transition are rooted in relational uncertainty and interference from partners. The model has been

pressed into service to understand transitions as diverse as how people navigate serious involvement (Knobloch and Theiss, 2010; Solomon and Theiss, 2008), embark on parenthood (Theiss, Estlein, and Weber, 2013), contend with a breast cancer diagnosis (Weber and Solomon, 2008), cope with infertility (Steuber and Solomon, 2008; 2012), and grapple with depression (Knobloch and Delaney, 2012). *Empirical investigations.* We have collaborated with colleagues to employ the relational turbulence model to illuminate how military couples and families navigate the transitions embedded in the deployment cycle (Knobloch, Pusateri et al., in press a; in press b; Knobloch and Theiss, 2011; 2012). To date, the bulk of our efforts have considered the model's logic as an explanation for the behavior of returning service members and at-home romantic partners during the transition from deployment to reintegration (Knobloch and Theiss, 2014).

A starting point was to identify the issues of relational uncertainty and interference from partners that military couples encounter when they are reunited following deployment. Knobloch and Theiss (2012) asked 259 individuals who had navigated the post-deployment transition during the past six months to describe any questions about involvement or hindrance from their partner they had experienced. Results revealed seven themes of relational uncertainty, including questions about commitment, reintegration, household stressors, personality changes, sexual behavior and infidelity, the health of the service member, and communication. Findings also indicated eight issues of interference from partners, including disruptions regarding everyday routines, household chores, control issues, feeling smothered, parenting, partner differences, social networks and social activities, and not having enough time to spend together. The results of this study are consistent with the model's assumption that relational uncertainty and interference from partners are relevant to the post-deployment transition.

Other work has tested the model's predictions linking relational uncertainty and interference from partners to upheaval. Two studies speak to this issue. Knobloch and Theiss (2011) collected online survey data from 220 service members who had returned home from deployment during the past six months. Results compatible with the model's logic demonstrated that the relational uncertainty and interference from partners reported by military personnel were negatively associated with their relationship satisfaction. Theiss and Knobloch (2014), who drew on quantitative data from the sample of returning service members and at-home romantic partners considered by Knobloch and Theiss (2012), reported that individuals experiencing relational uncertainty and interference from partners during the post-deployment transition judged their relationship to be more tumultuous, viewed their partner as less responsive to their needs, and were less likely to engage in relationship maintenance behaviors. These findings, taken together, imply that relational uncertainty and interference from partners are tied to turmoil upon reunion following deployment.

Another project sought to map how the mechanisms of relational turbulence operate over time during the transition from deployment to reunion. To examine this issue, Knobloch, Ebata, McClaghlin, and Ogolsky (2013) asked 118 military couples to report on their experiences once per month during the first three months upon reunion. The indicator of relational turbulence they examined was *difficulty with reintegration*, defined as the interpersonal challenges military couples may encounter upon reunion (Chandra et al., 2010; Chandra, Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2011). Examples include problems getting reacquainted, having trouble managing a partner's mood changes, difficulty rebalancing household and parenting responsibilities, and being worried about the possibility of a future deployment. Results showed that returning service members and at-home romantic partners who experienced more relational uncertainty and interference from partners reported more difficulty with reintegration from month to month. These initial findings are promising because they suggest that the relational turbulence model has utility for depicting how the post-deployment transition unfolds over time.

#### SYNTHESIZING FEATURES OF MILITARY CULTURE WITH THEORY AND RESEARCH ON MILITARY FAMILIES

We opened this chapter by noting that military culture is an integral aspect of the relationships among service members, their romantic partners, and their children (Hall, 2008; 2012a; 2012b). Our review highlighted five features of military culture that are especially relevant to military families: (a) a warrior identity, (b) an authoritarian structure, (c) the primacy of the mission, (d) geographic mobility and periodic separations, and (e) the risk of disaster, injury, and death. With that foundation in place, we described the insights about military families generated by attachment theory, family stress theory, ambiguous loss frameworks, and the relational turbulence model. Our final task is to synthesize the two domains by describing how the literature may advance with more sensitivity to understanding military culture.

The four theories are impressive in the strengths they bring to the task of explaining the relationship functioning of military families. Attachment theory calls attention to the role that early childhood experiences play in how people respond to the stressors of military life (e.g., Bowlby, 1982; Forbes et al., 2010). Even more noteworthy, scholars of attachment theory have moved beyond an individual-level focus to examine the interplay between partners within military families (e.g., Ein-Dor et al., 2010). Family stress theory takes a different approach by emphasizing the intersection between the resources people have available to them and the meanings they attach to potentially stressful circumstances (Hill, 1949; McCubbin and Patterson, 1983a; 1983b); its strength lies in its exhaustive organization of the factors that give rise to the resilience of military families. Ambiguous loss frameworks are helpful for understanding

how service members, their romantic partners, and their children cope with grief (Boss, 1999; 2006). They add to the landscape of knowledge about military families by elucidating people's perceptions of circumstances marked by uncertainty, anxiety, and sadness (e.g., Faber et al., 2008; Wiens and Boss, 2006). The relational turbulence model highlights factors internal to relationships to explain how military families experience the cycle of deployment and reunion (Knobloch and Theiss, 2011; 2012). Like family stress theory, the relational turbulence model concentrates on the processes at work during times of transition, but the model departs from the other frameworks by accentuating the relationship dynamics within military families (Knobloch and Theiss, 2014). The four theories, taken together, illustrate the diversity of conceptual approaches to understanding the interpersonal well-being of military families.

A striking difference among the four theories is their scope. Whereas attachment theory is broadly applicable to a variety of situations facing service members, their romantic partners, and their children, the other three theories consider how military families cope with a discrete stressor. Wide variation in latitude exists among the latter three theories, too. Family stress theory privileges comprehensiveness over precision (Huebner, 2009), but ambiguous loss frameworks (Wiens and Boss, 2006) and the relational turbulence model (Knobloch and Theiss, 2014) focus more narrowly on specific circumstances facing military families (e.g., grief situations for ambiguous loss frameworks; transitions embedded in the deployment cycle for the relational turbulence model). In sum, scholars seeking to investigate the relationship functioning of military families have their choice of theories pitched at multiple levels of abstraction.

Perhaps most germane to our analysis is the fact that the four theories incorporate signature features of military culture with varying degrees of sophistication. Family stress theory (Hill, 1949) and ambiguous loss frameworks (Wiens and Boss, 2006) trace their roots to military family life, so their premises are explicitly tailored to the lifestyle of service members, their romantic partners, and their children. Scholars applying the relational turbulence model to military couples have made some strides in tailoring the theory's key constructs to the issues salient to service members and their romantic partners (e.g., Knobloch and Theiss, 2012), but work is left to be done to fully integrate its tenets with features of military culture. Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982) is the least overtly tied to military culture among the four theories presented in this chapter. Despite its lack of integration with military culture, however, attachment theory has demonstrated remarkable utility for predicting who will be resilient to the demands of military life (e.g., Medway et al., 1995; Troxel and Germain, 2011). Clearly, all four theories show substantial promise for shedding light on the link between military culture and relationship functioning.

Exciting avenues for future research stem from ways that the four theories could better assimilate military culture into their logic. Attachment theory, for

example, could be used to examine whether people with certain attachment orientations are more attracted to (and perform better under) an authoritarian structure. It also could be employed to gauge people's propensity to worry about the risk of disaster, injury, and death in conjunction with military service. Family stress theory could consider the role played by the warrior identity in how military personnel, their romantic partners, and their children appraise potentially stressful situations. Ambiguous loss frameworks, for their part, could examine the primacy of the mission as an attitude that may contribute to family members' sense of ambiguous presence (e.g., the service member is "there but not there"). Finally, the relational turbulence model is well positioned to expand beyond the deployment cycle to understand how military families interact during the transitions generated by geographic mobility. We encourage scholars to build on these suggestions to better integrate military culture into theory-driven programs of research on the relationship functioning of military families.

Another agenda item is to capitalize on the implications of these theories for education, prevention, and intervention efforts. Attachment theory suggests that the resilience of military family members could be enhanced by cultivating attachment security to the extent that it is malleable (e.g., Elin-Dor et al., 2010). Family stress theory implies that community outreach programs should be devoted to providing tangible resources and optimizing the helpfulness of service members, their romantic partners, and their children (e.g., Huebner, 2009; Wiens and Boss, 2006). Ambiguous loss frameworks hint that military families could be more successful if they were trained to establish presence more effectively during times of both separation and togetherness (e.g., Faber et al., 2008; Huebner et al., 2007; see also Maguire et al., 2013). The relational turbulence model indicates that people could negotiate times of transition more effectively if they worked to resolve their relational uncertainty and troubleshoot potential areas of interference in their daily routines (e.g., Knobloch and Theiss, 2011; Theiss and Knobloch, 2014). We look forward to future scholarship that employs these theories to derive evidence-based guidelines to help military families thrive in the midst of their unique culture.

#### CONCLUSION

Our objective was to encourage scholars examining the relationship functioning of military families to be more attuned to the central values of military culture. We started by explicating five characteristics that embody the military lifestyle: (a) a warrior identity, (b) an authoritarian structure, (c) the primacy of the mission, (d) geographic mobility and periodic separations, and (e) the risk of disaster, injury, and death. We noted that these aspects of military culture can be both functional and dysfunctional for people's ability to maintain rewarding interpersonal relationships (e.g., Hall, 2008; 2011a; Sherman and

Bowling, 2011). Next, we explicated four theories of relationship functioning that have been applied to military families and examined by empirical research: (a) attachment theory, (b) family stress theory, (c) ambiguous loss frameworks, and (d) the relational turbulence model. In a final section, we tied the two halves of the chapter together by providing our recommendations for how the theories can progress with more attention to the features of military culture. We hope our analysis proves fruitful both for advancing the literature on the relationship functioning of military families and for spurring insights to help military personnel, their romantic partners, and their children sustain satisfying interpersonal ties while so generously serving their country.

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## Prejudice and stigma in intimate relationships: implications for relational and personal health outcomes

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People around the world have more freedom today than ever before to pursue romantic and sexual relationships with the persons of their choosing. However, despite greater social acceptance of diverse relationship types, not all relationship variations are seen as equally valid. For instance, although interracial marriage is legal in the United States, contemporary public opinion polls have found that as many as two out of five Americans would not accept a family member marrying someone outside of their own race (Wang, 2012). Some US churches have even gone as far as to refuse the wishes of parishioners of different races to marry in recent years (Estep, 2011). Same-sex couples are the targets of perhaps even more widespread discrimination. In the United States alone, thirty-one of the fifty states enacted constitutional amendments banning formal legal recognition of same-sex relationships between 1998 and 2012. In discussions about the legal standing of same-sex couples, many people have argued that same-sex marriage should not be legalized because it is a “slippery slope” toward recognition of non-monogamous unions (Dolan, 2011). Non-monogamous relationships are one of the few romantic arrangements that evoke even greater social disdain than gay and lesbian partnerships (Conley et al., 2013).

Of course, there are many other types of relationships beyond those mentioned above that can be the targets of social stigma (e.g., age-gap, inter-cultural, or interreligious relationships). All of these variations share a common bias that stems from some aspect of the relationship itself. Outside of their relationship, these individuals may not be subject to other forms of bias in their everyday life (e.g., someone involved in an interracial relationship may only feel stigmatized when their partner is known to others). In this respect, relationship status can be viewed as a distinct social identity that is independent of other personal identities an individual might possess (Brewer, 2008).

Socially marginalized relationships are common in the Western world. For instance, US census data reveal that just over 8 percent of marriages are interracial (Wang, 2012), while 8 percent could be classified as age-gap (i.e., characterized by an age difference of more than ten years between the partners; US

new roles and responsibilities during a tour of duty, often while worrying about the well-being of the deployed service member and each other (Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008; Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass, 2007). Family members worry because the risks of war are real. Approximately 6,600 American service members have died during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (U.S. Department of Defense, 2013), leaving family members to face intense grief (Chapin, 2011). Another 50,000 American service members have been wounded in action (U.S. Department of Defense, 2013), leaving family members to care for the injured (e.g., Nichols, Martindale-Adams, Graney, Zuber, & Burns, 2013). Even when service members return home without visible wounds, nearly 30% screen positive for anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or traumatic brain injury (TBI; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008), leaving family members to cope with the repercussions of these invisible wounds (Monson, Taft, & Fredman, 2009). Fortunately, the vast majority of returning military personnel readjust well to domestic life, but family members still need to renegotiate roles and disclosure patterns (Faber et al., 2008; Wilson, Wilkum, Chernichky, MacDermid, & Broniarczyk, 2011). Simply put, service members may deploy, but all members of military families are affected by deployment.

A third reason this topic is important to understand is because military culture shapes family communication in unique ways. As Maguire and Wilson (2013) note, "the military creates a culture that values collectivism, hierarchy, structure, authority, and control, and requires service members to place mission readiness above all else" (p. 750). Understanding the military requires fluency in an array of technical terms (e.g., *E-5*, *OFF*, *OCONUS*, *TRICARE*), knowledge of how the chain of command permeates the lives of service members and their families, appreciation of core values such as personal sacrifice and discipline, and respect for those who serve (Blaisure, Saathoff-Wells,

Pereira, MacDermid Wadsworth, & Dombro, 2012; Greene, Buckman, Dandeker, & Greenberg, 2010b). Military culture may inhibit service members from seeking help due to concerns that their superiors or peers may stigmatize them as weak, undisciplined, or disloyal to the mission (Hoge et al., 2004). In addition, military culture may give rise to different connotations of family communication constructs such as *uncertainty* and *conformity orientation* compared to civilian cohorts (e.g., Knobloch & Theiss, 2012; Wilson, Chernichky, Wilkum, & Owlett, in press). Consequently, scholars cannot apply family communication principles to military families wholesale without considering how those principles may be qualified by military culture.

In this chapter, we synthesize communication research to illuminate how military families interact across the deployment cycle. Several programs of research on communication in military families are underway, but the promise of this work has yet to be fully realized. Our goal is to facilitate the growth of the literature by organizing what is known and unknown about communication processes within military families. We set the stage for our review by delineating the unique features of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and describing the effects of deployment on military families. Next, we employ the emotional cycle of deployment model (Pincus, House, Christenson, & Adler, 2001) as a framework for summarizing research on how military families communicate across the stages of deployment. We conclude by sketching directions for future research geared toward advancing theory and better supporting military families.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq differ from prior U.S. military involvements in several respects. As Tanielian and Jaycox (2008) noted, "[p]robably the signal difference of the conflicts

## Unique Features of the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq

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### CHAPTER 24

# Communication in Military Families Across the Deployment Cycle

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## Communication in Military Families Across the Deployment Cycle

Since the terrorist attacks on U.S. soil on September 11, 2001, wartime deployment has become a reality for many service members and their loved ones. Communication scholars, clinicians, and civilians need to understand how military families communicate across the deployment cycle for three reasons. First, millions of families in the United States and abroad have been impacted by war over the past decade. Since 2001, approximately 2.5 million active duty and reserve members of the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard have deployed

to Afghanistan and Iraq (Adams, 2013). Approximately 56% of these service members were married at the time of their deployment and left behind spouses, 44% were parents and left behind children (U.S. Department of Defense, 2010), and virtually all left behind parents, siblings, and/or extended family members who worried about their safety. The topics discussed in this chapter have relevance to millions of families not just in the United States but also families of coalition forces as well as families in Afghanistan and Iraq who have seen the effects of war firsthand (MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010).

Second, military deployment reverberates throughout the whole family system. For example, both at-home partners and children shoulder

in Afghanistan and Iraq is that they mark the first time that the United States has attempted to fight an extended conflict with a post-Cold War all-volunteer force" (p. 22). Although both Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) were characterized by early U.S. victories, both conflicts became protracted, and the United States responded with troop surges to Iraq in 2007 and to Afghanistan in 2009. These surges strained American forces such that repeated deployments became necessary. Of the 2.5 million U.S. military personnel who have served in Afghanistan and Iraq, approximately 825,000 (33%) have deployed two or more times, and 400,000 (16%) have deployed three or more times (Adams, 2013). Deployment length varies by branch of service, but in many cases, troop surges resulted in longer tours with less time at home in between. For example, although Army policy specifies that deployments should not exceed 12 months with 24 months of time at home in between, deployments during the troop surge in Iraq were extended to 15 months, and many units were redeployed after being home for only 12 to 18 months (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). Of course, repeated deployments with shorter times at home create stress not just for service members but also for their families (e.g., Chandra et al., 2010; Mansfield et al., 2010).

A second unique aspect of the current conflicts is the unprecedented role played by U.S. National Guard and Reserve personnel. During the past decade, *civilian soldiers* or *weekend warriors* have been transformed from a strategic reserve that responds to domestic disasters to an operational force that is activated as needed (Blaisure et al., 2012). Approximately 30% of troops serving in Afghanistan and Iraq come from National Guard and Reserve units (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). Reservists tend to be older than active duty forces; indeed, the proportion of service members 45 years of age and older is five times higher in reserve than active duty units (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). Reservists and their families face unique challenges across the deployment cycle, particularly because they are not

embedded in military communities that offer understanding and support (Blaisure et al., 2012). A lack of integration into military communities may explain why National Guard and Reserve members screen positive for PTSD and other mental health issues at higher rates after deployment compared to active duty service members (Milliken, Auchterlonie, & Hoge, 2007).

Third, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have exacerbated a growing military-civilian divide. More than 11% of the U.S. population served in World War II, so nearly every American knew a warfighter personally, but only 0.8% of the U.S. population has served in Afghanistan and Iraq (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). Accordingly, "a smaller share of Americans currently serve in the U.S. Armed Forces than at any time since the peace-time era between World Wars I and II" (Pew Research Center, 2011, p. 1). This trend, plus the phasing out of the draft in 1973, has produced a generational gap in family connections to the military. In a Pew Research Center survey (2011), more than 75% of adults 50 years of age and older reported that an immediate family member (i.e., parent, sibling, spouse, or child) had served or was currently serving in the military, whereas only 33% of adults 18 to 29 years of age did so. One consequence of the growing military-civilian divide is that many veterans (77%) and civilians (71%) feel the general public does not understand the problems faced by service members (Pew Research Center, 2011). These numbers highlight both the challenges of military life and the need for knowledge about how military families communicate across the deployment cycle.

## Effects of Deployment on Military Families

Military personnel mobilized for OEF and OIF are incredibly resilient in the wake of deployment stressors (Bonanno et al., 2012), but a tour of duty can take a significant toll on service members. Upwards of 80% of combat infantry troops

deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq have reported receiving artillery fire, with upwards of 66% having reported receiving small arms fire (Hoge et al., 2004). The prevalence rates of PTSD increased 4-fold to 7-fold among military personnel deployed after the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Seal et al., 2009). Moreover, the rates of self-reported symptoms of major depression, PTSD, and alcohol misuse are significantly higher among combat infantry soldiers after returning home from deployment to Afghanistan or Iraq compared to rates of symptoms reported by members of similar units before deployment (Hoge et al., 2004). Deployments of longer duration also predict more alcohol misuse (Allison-Apa, Ritter, Sikes, & Ball, 2010; see also Milliken et al., 2007). All of these statistics underscore how challenging deployment can be for service members.

At-home partners also display notable strength during the wake of deployment (MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010; Park, 2011). Reflected in 50% of civilian spouses responding to the Survey of Army Families (SAF-V) reporting that they were coping well or very well with a current separation (Orthner & Rose, 2005b).

Without question, however, deployment can be taxing for at-home partners. Army wives whose husbands deployed to Afghanistan or Iraq for 1 to 11 months used mental health services at a 19% higher rate compared to Army wives whose husbands did not deploy, and Army wives whose husbands were away for more than 11 months used mental health services at a 27% higher rate (Mansfield et al., 2010). Notably, the strain of deployment may escalate the longer the separation lasts. At-home parents who have experienced more months of deployment report worse emotional well-being, more hassles, and more parental distress (Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2012; Lester et al., 2010). These findings highlight the demands of deployment for at-home partners.

Although military children, too, demonstrate remarkable resiliency during deployment (Lester et al., 2010; Orthner & Rose, 2005a; Park, 2011), a parent's tour of duty can be stressful for youth of all ages. Deployment corresponds

with elevated rates of child maltreatment (Gibbs, Martin, Kupper, & Johnson, 2007; Rentz et al., 2007) and may have detrimental effects on academic achievement, particularly in mathematics (Engel, Gallagher, & Lyle, 2010). Deployment also can engender emotional and behavioral problems (Chandra et al., 2010; Lipari, Winters, Matos, Smith, & Rock, 2010). For example, when a parent is away on a tour of duty compared to home, children are 18% more likely to be diagnosed with a behavioral disorder and 19% more likely to be diagnosed with a stress disorder (Gorman, Eide, & Hisle-Gorman, 2010). These numbers are especially striking because children are 11% less likely to visit an outpatient health clinic at all during deployment compared to when the family is intact, perhaps because sole caregivers need to be selective making trips to the doctor (Gorman et al., 2010). Increases in the number and duration of a parent's deployment correspond with more emotional and behavioral difficulties for youth as well (Chandra et al., 2010; Lester et al., 2010). Clearly, deployment can have detrimental outcomes for military children.

Robust evidence accentuates the burdens of deployment, but a tour of duty can be beneficial for military couples and their children in several ways. In a study of Army soldiers who had recently returned home from a peacekeeping mission to Bosnia, 77% of participants reported positive consequences of deployment, including earning additional money, growing stronger as a person, and having time away to think and reflect (Newby et al., 2005). Similarly, reserve component family members who had experienced a post-9/11 deployment identified positive outcomes such as increased family closeness, financial gain, pride in civic service, more confidence, a new awareness of global issues, and more clarity about their priorities (Castaneda et al., 2008; Wheeler & Torres Stone, 2010). Military children describe benefits such as cultivating their independence, building family cohesion, serving as a confidant for the at-home parent, having the vice member recognize their new maturity upon reunion, and preparing for future deployments

(Knobloch, Pusateri, Ebata, & McGlaughlin, in press-b; Wilson et al., 2011). Contrary to conventional wisdom, deployment also may buffer against marital dissolution (Karney & Crown, 2011). All of these findings indicate that deployment can provide opportunities for personal and dyadic growth.

Without a doubt, the stressors posed by deployment can have significant detrimental consequences for service members, at-home partners, and children. At the same time, many military families are resilient across the deployment cycle and identify positive consequences of their experience. A critical question arises from this paradox: What are the parameters that predict whether military families struggle or thrive across the deployment cycle? Of course, one piece of the puzzle lies in the sources of support available to military families (e.g., Huebner, Mancini, Bowen, & Orthner, 2009). A second piece of the puzzle, and one that we find especially compelling as family communication scholars, lies in the interaction dynamics within families (Sahlstein, Maguire, & Timmerman, 2009; Wilson et al., 2011). We devote the following section to describing the communication processes relevant to military families across the deployment cycle.

## Family Communication Across the Deployment Cycle

Scholars have long recognized the utility of conceptualizing deployment as a sequential process that occurs via recognizable stages of progression. Perhaps the most widely known process framework is the *emotional cycle of deployment* model proposed by Pincus et al. (2001), a team of military psychiatrists who constructed their model based on their professional practice, their personal experience, and their reading of the research literature. Although the model has not been the target of substantial empirical evaluation, it has fulfilled Pincus et al.'s (2001) vision "for use as a tool in education, intervention, and

research" (p. 15). The model divides the deployment cycle into five stages that span from preparing for departure (the pre-deployment stage), to the separation itself (the deployment stage) and then the sustainment stage, and finally to reunion (the re-deployment stage and then the post-deployment stage). The crux of the model's logic is that military families who are unable to meet the challenges embedded in each stage will experience distress. In the subsections that follow, we summarize the model's description of each stage, and then we review the communication research relevant to that part of the trajectory.

### Preparing for Departure

The *pre-deployment stage* begins when the service member receives deployment orders and concludes when he or she departs for the mission; the length of this stage is variable and can range from several weeks to many months. The initial shock of deployment orders may be accompanied by feelings of denial, distress, and loss. These emotional difficulties may be compounded by the logistical demands of preparing for the service member's departure. In addition to long hours of extensive training for service members, military families must tackle a formidable list of domestic tasks (e.g., financial planning, will preparation, child care arrangements) plus carve out opportunities to spend quality time together. Tensions may run high if service members privilege the upcoming mission over fostering closeness, if family members hide their grief behind a cyclone of anger, or if children respond to the impending departure with temper tantrums or anxiety-laden behavior.

**Managing Uncertainty.** Very little work has examined how military families communicate as they ready for deployment, but three interview studies suggest that the weeks leading up to departure can be filled with uncertainty. Wiens and Boss (2006) observed that military families

may experience ambiguous loss such that the service member is physically present at home but psychologically absent because he or she is preoccupied with mission preparation. Similarly, Sahlstein et al.'s (2009) interviews revealed that Army wives experience uncertainty about the timing of departure, their ability to cope with the separation, and how their relationship will be affected. According to Lapp et al. (2010), at-home spouses report feeling that their lives are on hold because they are unable to plan for the future or make decisions due to ambiguity about the departure date. Participants in Lapp et al.'s (2010) study stayed busy to cope with their uncertainty by undertaking home repairs, learning how to complete tasks they would need to perform during deployment, and making end-of-life preparations. Taken together, these three studies imply that the pre-deployment stage can generate considerable uncertainty for military families.

### Separation

The emotional cycle of deployment model divides the separation portion of the deployment trajectory into two stages. The *deployment stage* encompasses the one-month period following the service member's departure. Military families may experience a range of conflicting emotions, including sadness, fear, anxiety, loneliness, disorientation, and even relief at moving forward in the process. Individuals may have trouble sleeping or worry excessively about the safety of their loved ones at home or overseas. Telephone calls, e-mail exchanges, and video conversations connecting the deployed service member with family members at home can be reassuring and uplifting, but readily-available communication also can provoke angst if family members are unable to fulfill each other's expectations for support.

The *sustainment stage* stretches from the second month after departure to approximately one month before the service member is slated to return home. Both the deployed service member

and at-home family members may settle into a new routine and gain confidence in their autonomy. They also may cultivate new sources of support, including comrades in the unit, extended family members, friends, religious networks, community organizations, and military family support groups. Deployed service members and at-home family members may continue to have difficulty negotiating their communication exchanges—not just the amount, channel, and timing of communication—but also the appropriate level of openness about conflict-riddled topics. The model emphasizes that the capacity of at-home caregivers to cope with deployment is a key predictor of children's well-being; this claim is bolstered by mounting empirical evidence (Chandra et al., 2010; Flake, Davis, Johnson, & Middleton, 2009; Lester et al., 2010).

**Coping With Stress.** Some research has considered the stressors faced by at-home family members during deployment and how individuals cope in response (e.g., Dimiceli, Steinhardt, & Smith, 2010; Lapp et al., 2010; Padden, Connors, & Agazio, 2011). At-home spouses identify the major stressors of deployment to be worrying about the service member's safety, taking sole responsibility for running the household, functioning as a single parent, waiting for phone calls, and feeling lonely (Dimiceli et al., 2010; Faber et al., 2008; Lapp et al., 2010; Wheeler & Torres Stone, 2010). Military children report challenges such as missing the deployed family member, additional responsibilities, disruptions to daily routines, emotional difficulties, and increased conflict (Knobloch, Pusateri, et al., in press-b; Mmari, Roche, Sudhinaraset, & Blum, 2009; Wilson et al., 2011).

At-home family members have many options for coping with deployment stressors. Military spouses rely on coping strategies such as keeping busy, maintaining a connection with the deployed service member, fostering normalcy, soliciting support from family and friends, cultivating a strong identity, relying on religion, carving out time for personal interests, reframing stressors as

opportunities, maximizing productivity while minimizing negative emotion, and avoiding news reports about the dangers of war (Lapp et al., 2010; Villagran, Canzona, & Ledford, 2013; Wheeler & Torres Stone, 2010). Of course, some coping strategies are more effective than others. For example, military wives report better mental health when they cope by actively working to resolve their difficulties or by remaining optimistic (Dimiceli et al., 2010; Padden et al., 2011). People's coping strategies may play a key role in how they fare during deployment.

**Communicating Across Continents.** Other research has investigated the communication dynamics between deployed service members and at-home family members. Military personnel, particularly those who are married, expect to be able to communicate frequently with family members at home during a tour of duty, but they end up disappointed if they do not have as much access to communication technology as they expected (Schumm, Bell, Ender, & Rice, 2004). Lack of access can stem from unreliable technology, scarce equipment, prohibitive expense, and channel closures after security breaches (Greene, Buckman, Dandeker, & Greenberg, 2010a; Schumm et al., 2004).

Communication bridging the warzone and the home front can be both helpful and harmful to family morale (Greene et al., 2010a; Warner et al., 2007). On one hand, supportive and constructive exchanges can build intimacy, provide comfort, allay fears, and counteract loneliness. Parents and children can connect during special occasions such as birthdays and holidays, and all family members can rest assured that their loved ones are functioning effectively. On the other hand, communication exchanges that are conflict-laden or unpleasant can exacerbate an already stressful situation. Problematic communication episodes can distract military personnel from their mission, make at-home family members feel guilty about adding to the service member's burden, and increase feelings of helplessness and isolation for everyone involved.

The outcomes of communication among military family members during deployment are contingent on many factors, including features of the exchanges, motives of the interactants, and characteristics of relationships. With respect to the amount and content of communication, Ferrier-Auerbach, Erbes, Polusny, Rath, and Sponheim (2010) observed that National Guard soldiers deployed to Iraq reported more generalized distress when they had infrequent or supportive communication with friends and family members at home. With respect to the motivations underlying people's behavior, Joseph and Afifi (2010) found that military wives who withheld disclosures to shield their husbands from worry experienced worse physical and mental health. With respect to qualities of relationships, Carter et al. (2011) identified marital satisfaction as a moderator. For service members with high marital satisfaction, overall frequency of communication with their spouse during deployment corresponded with less PTSD symptoms upon homecoming, but for service members with low marital satisfaction, more frequent delayed communication (i.e., letters, care packages, e-mail messages) with their spouse during deployment corresponded with more PTSD symptoms during reintegration. All of this evidence showcases the complexities of the association between people's communication during deployment and their personal and relational well-being.

A comprehensive understanding of the interaction dynamics that link service members in theatre and loved ones at home also requires attention to what military families do *not* talk about. Indeed, family members may strategically withhold information from each other during deployment (Joseph & Afifi, 2010; Knobloch, Ebata, McLaughlin, & Theiss, 2013). Avoided topics include negative behaviors, conflict-riddled issues, dangers experienced during deployment, confidential military information, and feelings of distress (Frisby, Byrnes, Mansson, Booth-Butterfield, & Birmingham, 2011; Knobloch, Ebata,

McLaughlin, & Theiss, 2013; Owlett et al., 2012). Topic avoidance may be perpetuated by and directed toward multiple targets, including deployed service members, at-home partners, children, and social network members (Owlett et al., 2012).

Topic avoidance during deployment may stem from desires to safeguard others from anxiety and to circumvent face threats to self and others. For example, military wives tend to conceal their concerns during deployment if they consider their husband to be in danger in the warzone or unresponsive of their disclosures (Joseph & Afifi, 2010). Moreover, military adolescents report that topic avoidance within their families is motivated to shield themselves or others from anxiety or because talking about the issue would be futile (Owlett et al., 2012). Military youth recognize that censoring information allows adults to mask the dangers of deployment and to ensure that children receive developmentally appropriate details (Knobloch, Pusateri, Ebata, & McLaughlin, in press-a; Owlett et al., 2012). These findings underscore the nuances underlying people's decisions to share or withhold information during deployment.

**Maintaining Relationships.** A related body of work has examined how military families preserve intimacy during deployment. Military families generally seek to keep the service member psychologically present in the household despite his or her physical absence (Wiens & Boss, 2006), but maintaining relationships during a tour of duty reflects a delicate balance between sustaining bonds versus cultivating autonomy. For example, Sahlstein et al. (2009) found that Army wives face a tension between preserving a connection with their deployed husband versus developing their own independence. Although wives wanted to foster interdependence with their spouse, they also sought to live their own lives and bolster their independence (Sahlstein et al., 2009). Thus, relationship maintenance during deployment requires the

ability to navigate competing goals (Maguire, Heinemann-LaFave, & Sahlstein, 2013; Sahlstein et al., 2009).

Research has delineated the strategies military spouses use to maintain their relationship during deployment. Three relational maintenance strategies were apparent from interviews Merolla (2010) and Maguire et al. (2013) conducted with wives of deployed military personnel. *Intrapersonal strategies* included behaviors that wives enacted individually, such as cherishing mementos, thinking positively, becoming self-reliant, praying, counting their blessings, journaling, imagining interactions with their husband, planning for the future, recalibrating their perception of time, and visiting meaningful places. *Partner interaction strategies* involved communication between partners, including sending gifts, debriefing each other about daily events, avoiding topics of conflict, expressing affection, maintaining communication routines, planning for the future, sharing openly, reassuring each other about their safety, communicating positively, talking about spiritual beliefs, carving out quality time together, giving and receiving support, affirming commitment, collaborating on tasks, and creating distance when needed. *Social network strategies* encompassed support from individuals external to the relationship, including receiving help from friends and family, talking about the absent person, being social, focusing on children, becoming involved in military family support groups, and withdrawing when necessary.

An intriguing finding from both Merolla's (2010) and Maguire et al.'s (2013) data is that some relational maintenance strategies have unintended negative consequences for military families. For example, mediated communication channels can be a double-edged sword: Wives were thankful for opportunities to connect with their husbands in real time, but they also reported a lack of availability, reliability, and privacy inherent in the technology (Maguire et al., 2013; Merolla, 2010). Wives also recounted episodes in which their use of a relational maintenance

strategy produced an outcome that violated their expectations, increased their stress, or overwhelmed them with too much contact (Maguire et al., 2013). Hence, these results illustrate the challenges of maintaining close ties during a tour of duty.

## Reunion

The emotional cycle of deployment model assigns two stages to the reunion period. The *re-deployment stage* indexes the month before the service member's expected homecoming. It can be a time of eager anticipation coupled with apprehension about reunion. Returning service members and at-home partners may wonder about their ability to renew their connection while preserving their autonomy. This stage also may be marked by a flurry of domestic activity. Indeed, family members may throw themselves into preparations for the service member's arrival and attend to household tasks that languished during the separation. Expectations for reunion are likely to mount for all family members.

The *post-deployment stage* begins with homecoming and typically lasts 3 to 6 months afterward. The reunion day can be intensely joyful, especially if the military unit returns home to ceremonial festivities, but it can be less than idyllic if last-minute changes in arrival plans prevent family members from being present to greet the returning service member. In the days and weeks following the reunion, military families may experience a honeymoon period characterized by vacation days, special celebrations, and quality time together.

Eventually, the honeymoon period may give way to unexpected stressors. Returning service members may be caught off guard by the changes that occurred at home, the milestones they missed, and the challenges of acclimating to a new domestic routine. At-home partners may be reluctant to yield their personal space and their decision-making power. Moreover, if

returning service members are unable or unwilling to help with household responsibilities, at-home partners may grow increasingly resentful. Children may have difficulty relating to the returning service member, reject discipline attempts, display separation anxiety, or appear distant. Notably, some military families may be just settling into a comfortable routine when it is time to think about a subsequent deployment.

**Managing Relational Uncertainty.** Work drawing on the relational turbulence model has highlighted the process of managing relational uncertainty as instrumental during reunion (Knobloch & Theiss, in press). *Relational uncertainty* refers to the questions people experience about the definition of a relationship (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011). According to the relational turbulence model, relational uncertainty generates upheaval during times of transition because individuals lack information to produce and process messages effectively. Returning service members and at-home partners grapple with several issues of relational uncertainty upon homecoming, including questions about maintaining commitment, reintegrating daily activities, addressing household stressors, acclimating to personality changes, coordinating sexual relations and resolving questions about infidelity, preserving the health of the service member, and communicating effectively (Knobloch & Theiss, 2012). Military adolescents contend with questions about the service member's activities during deployment, why the service member joined the military and deployed, how to navigate family life, and the possibility of future deployments (Knobloch, Pusateri, et al., in press-a).

Relational uncertainty complicates communication during the post-deployment transition. For example, returning service members and at-home partners experiencing relational uncertainty upon reunion are less willing to maintain their relationship using strategies such as offering assurances and communicating openly

(Theiss & Knobloch, in press-a). They also avoid talking about sensitive topics (Knobloch, Ebata, McLaughlin, & Theiss, 2013), view their mate as less responsive to their needs (Theiss & Knobloch, in press-a), and have difficulty adjusting to reintegration (Knobloch, Ebata, McLaughlin, & Ogolsky, 2013). Military personnel grappling with relational uncertainty upon homecoming report more aggressive and less open communication behavior (Theiss & Knobloch, in press-b), and they are less satisfied with their romantic relationship (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011). Taken together, this evidence implies that managing relational uncertainty is a key task for military couples during reunion.

**Coordinating Daily Routines.** *Interference from partners* occurs when a partner disrupts an individual's everyday routines (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011). The relational turbulence model argues that times of transition are ripe for people to hinder each other's daily goals, and in turn, experience upheaval in their relationship (Knobloch & Theiss, in press). Indeed, the post-deployment transition provides many opportunities for family members to interfere with each other's everyday routines. Military couples contend with disruptions tied to negotiating everyday routines, completing domestic responsibilities, distributing control, maintaining independence, parenting, dealing with differences between partners, coordinating social networks and social activities, and prioritizing time together (Knobloch & Theiss, 2012; see also Faber et al., 2008). Military youth also report trouble assimilating the returning service member back into daily life, particularly adapting to new discipline patterns and accommodating a new member of the household (Knobloch, Pusateri, et al., in press-a).

Individuals who perceive frequent disruptions from their partner communicate less effectively during reintegration. Recently-reunited military couples experiencing interference from partners employ less constructive conflict management strategies (Theiss & Knobloch, in press-a), view

their relationship as more turbulent (Theiss & Knobloch, in press-a), and report more trouble dealing with reintegration (Knobloch, Ebata, McLaughlin, & Ogolsky, 2013). Returning service members communicate in more aggressive and less open ways when encountering interference from partners (Theiss & Knobloch, in press-b); not surprisingly, they also report less relationship satisfaction (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011). These studies suggest that coordinating everyday routines may help military couples communicate effectively when reunited after a tour of duty.

**Negotiating Communicative Dilemmas.** Other scholarship has considered the challenges posed by communication during reunion. One such dilemma involves navigating the tension between communicating openly versus maintaining privacy. For example, military couples have to readjust to consulting each other about day-to-day decisions that they made independently during deployment (Faber et al., 2008). Recently reunited couples also face a delicate balance in deciding what information to reveal or conceal about their time apart. Disclosing sensitive details about what happened during the separation may cause worry, tension, or conflict, but withholding information may create distance between partners (Sahlstein et al., 2009). Reconstructing functional levels of disclosure is even more difficult if the returning service member is psychologically distant, managing visible or invisible wounds, preoccupied with memories of the deployment, or prefers to spend time with comrades from the unit (e.g., Sayers, 2011; Wiens & Boss, 2006).

Persuading a returning service member to seek help for a mental health problem is a complex conversation as well. If unit comrades decide to broach the topic with a returning service member, their message is more likely to be successful if it (a) conveys credibility; (b) emphasizes respect, trust, and positive outcomes; and (c) avoids using pejorative language or casting mental illness in a negative light (Clark-Hitt,

Smith, & Broderick, 2012). Military family members also encounter a difficult task if they need to persuade a returning service member to seek help for a mental health problem. They must juggle multiple goals such as gaining compliance, guarding against threats to their own face and the service member's face, communicating openly, expressing support, circumventing conflict, fostering a collaborative climate, and surmounting perceptions of stigma or diminished work productivity (Wilson, Dorrance Hall, & Gettings, 2013; Wilson, Gettings, & Dorrance Hall, 2013). Military family members face dilemmas from conflicting goals such as (a) emphasizing that the returning service member needs help without appearing unsupportive, and (b) wanting the returning service member to regain happiness while also being willing to listen to him or her vent about troubles (Wilson, Gettings, et al., 2013). In sum, both military colleagues and family members must contend with a host of complicated, sensitive, and face-threatening issues when urging a returning service member to solicit assistance for a mental health problem.

Helping military youth adjust to reintegration requires sophisticated communication as well. Some military adolescents interviewed by Knobloch, Pusateri, et al. (in press-a) said that reunion matched their expectations, others admitted to being disappointed that the service member's arrival did not live up to their idyllic vision of what homecoming would be like, and still others commented that they did not expect the returning service member to be so exhausted or so ill-tempered. Military youth who participated in focus groups conducted by Mmari et al. (2009) noted that getting reacquainted can be stressful if the returning service member has trouble appreciating the ways they have grown, matured, and contributed to the household during deployment. According to a survey study by Wilson et al. (in press), a family's communication patterns may play a role in how military children adjust to reunion: When deployed parents perceived a free and open exchange of

ideas by all family members, they reported that their eldest child displayed fewer behavioral problems and more constructive behavior during reintegration. In total, military youth appear to fare better during reunion if the returning service member communicates with sensitivity to their needs.

## Future Directions

This chapter examined communication across the deployment cycle to shed light on why military families may struggle or thrive during each stage. Our review revealed strands of communication research focused on how military families (a) manage uncertainty while preparing for departure; (b) cope with stress, communicate across continents, and maintain relationships during the separation; and (c) manage relational uncertainty, coordinate daily routines, and negotiate communicative dilemmas upon reunion. Moving forward, we see a need for more insight into diverse family forms. Most military family research has investigated traditional family configurations (e.g., deployed husbands/fathers, at-home wives/mothers), which reflects the structure of the U.S. armed forces to some extent. Approximately 85.5% of active duty and 82.0% of reserve component service members are male (U.S. Department of Defense, 2011). Yet these numbers mask greater underlying diversity. According to the same report, approximately 11.5% of married active duty personnel are married to another service member, and 47.3% of married female active duty personnel are part of a dual-military couple. Moreover, approximately 6.9% of all service members are single parents with children, and 32.9% of active duty single parents are female. Finally, 30.2% of active duty and 24.3% of reserve component personnel self-identify as a member of a racial/ethnic minority group (U.S. Department of Defense, 2011). Many questions remain about how family communication processes may differ when mothers, dual-military couples, single parents, service members

of color, or lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) service members deploy.

We also emphasize the need to move beyond questions about the amount or channel of family communication during deployment to investigate attributes of more and less successful communication during each stage. Caughlin's (2010) multiple goals theory of personal relationships seems especially promising in this regard. Indeed, multiple goals theory offers a framework for (a) defining communication quality in this context as the degree to which messages attend to multiple goals salient at each stage of the deployment cycle, (b) investigating how family members respond to each other's messages based on their inferences about each other's goals, and (c) explaining how messages and goal inferences shape the relationship satisfaction of military family members over time.

Prospective research that follows multiple family members over the full deployment cycle is imperative, given that most studies have gathered cross-sectional or retrospective data from a single family member. Longitudinal data would be helpful for (a) empirically testing claims from the emotional cycle of deployment model about the emotions and behaviors that typify each stage, (b) distinguishing different trajectories of family communication over time, (c) clarifying how people's expectations and behaviors during one stage affect their relationship satisfaction during subsequent stages, and (d) illuminating what types of support, resources, and interventions are helpful from pre-deployment through post-deployment. Gathering data from multiple family members would reveal the unique perspectives that deployed parents, at-home parents, and children have on these issues (e.g., Wilson et al., in press).

## Conclusion

Addressing these directions for future research will remain important for years to come. The United States will have a continued military

presence across the globe for the foreseeable future, and new conflicts are always possible. Families caring for service members who are dealing with visible or invisible wounds, or who are struggling with reintegration into domestic life, need continued support (Nichols et al., 2013). The size of the U.S. military is projected to shrink, which will result in many more veterans returning to civilian communities. In the words of First Lady Michelle Obama (Hussain, 2010):

If Americans respond to this challenge, if we mobilize every segment of society, if we work together, if we hold ourselves to the same high standard of excellence that our military families live by every day, then I know we can succeed. I know we can realize our vision of an America that truly supports and engages our military families not just now, but for decades to come.

Family communication scholars are well-positioned to help make this vision a reality by leveraging their expertise to assist and support military families in communicating effectively during times of war and peace.

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