

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Military Deployment of an Adult Child: Ambiguous Loss and Boundary Ambiguity Reflected in the Experiences of Parents of Service Members

Crow, J. R., Myers, D. R., Ellor, J. W., Dolan, S. L., & Morissette, S. (2016). Military deployment of an adult child: Ambiguous loss and boundary ambiguity reflected in the experiences of parents of service members *Marriage & Family Review*, 52(5), 481-509. doi:10.1080/01494929.2015.1115454

SUMMARY: The supportive role of parents of Service members is very important but often overlooked. A group of parents were interviewed to examine their reflections on their adult children's deployment. Results revealed that parents experienced ambiguous loss (i.e., there is no certainty that the adult child will come back, or return to the way they used to be) and boundary ambiguity (i.e., they were not sure if the deployed adult child should be kept in the family system psychologically) throughout their adult children's deployment cycle.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Parents felt ambivalent about their adult children's deployment because although they valued the patriotic impulse of the Service members, they were worried about the safety of their adult children, and the continuation of the parent-adult child relationship.
- Parents also experienced boundary ambiguity because they had difficulty situating and adjusting their adult children to a known and consistent familial context during the deployment cycle.
- The participating parents suggested coping methods to maintain familial bonds with their adult children in the military, such as mailing treats and other items, communication, and offering support to the Service members' significant others.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer support groups for parents of Service members that promote healthy coping and peer support
- Educate Service members (especially those who are single) about the importance of emotional and instrumental support from their parents during deployment
- Provide information to parents of Service members about how to maintain relationship with their adult children throughout the deployment cycle

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Raise awareness of the potential challenges that may be faced by parents of Service members
- Encourage public campaigns to provide parents of Service members with information about how to cope with their adult children's deployment, and how to access resources
- Support programs that aim to strengthen the bonds between Service members and their families

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METHODS

- Participants were recruited from the communities near a large Army installation through newsletters, announcements, and postings.
- Parents were interviewed in small groups including two to four people, and answered questions about how deployment impacted their family lives in both positive and negative ways; each group lasted for 90 minutes.
- Transcripts were coded to extract common themes and categories about the deployment cycle.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample included 21 parents of Service members; the average age of the parents was 56.60 years (SD = 6.85), and 18 of them were mothers.
- The average age of the adult children was 28.05 years (SD = 6.31), and the military branches they served in were Army, Marine Corps, Air Force, Navy, Air Force Reserve, and Air National Guard; the majority of the Service members were noncommissioned officer, followed by company-grade commissioned officers, junior enlisted ranks, and field-grade commissioned officers.
- The race of the participants were not specified in the article.

LIMITATIONS

- The sample was small, and it was over-represented by mothers, therefore the generalizability of the results is limited.
- The parents were interviewed in groups, so their answers may be influenced by other participants.
- Participants were self-selected, therefore results may be subjected to self-selection bias.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Use both quantitative and qualitative methods to collect information about parents' perspectives on their adult children's deployment
- Interview not only parents but also parent-adult child dyads to gain more comprehensive views of how deployment influences the whole family
- Recruit a larger and more gender-balanced sample, and select participants randomly

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