

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

Ambiguous Absence, Ambiguous Presence: A Qualitative Study of Military Reserve Families in Wartime

Faber, A. J., Willerton, E., Clymer, S. R., MacDermid, S. M., & Weiss, H. M. (2008). Ambiguous absence, ambiguous presence: A qualitative study of military reserve families in wartime. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 22(2), 222-230. doi:10.1037/0893-3200.22.2.222

SUMMARY: Army Reservists and their family members were interviewed seven times over the first year of the Reservists' return from Iraq. The authors examine families' experiences of three types of ambiguity: ambiguous absence (being physically absent but psychologically present), ambiguous presence (being physically present but psychologically absent), and boundary ambiguity (uncertainty of perceptions concerning family and roles and tasks within family).

KEY FINDINGS:

- Soldiers and their families reported that they had experienced ambiguous absence during deployment and faced issues such as adjusting to new roles and responsibilities and worrying about reunion experiences. These challenges may be particularly difficult for Reserve families, as they may be geographically distant from installations and/or military-provided resources.
- Upon reunion, Soldiers and their families experienced ambiguous presence, along with difficulty resuming roles and responsibilities, shifting to more open and regular communication, and the transition from Soldier to civilian.
- For most Soldiers and their families, boundary ambiguity dissipated around six weeks following the Reservist's return to civilian employment, which helped to establish a routine for the family.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide curriculum to help prepare families for challenges associated with both deployment and reintegration and teach them skills for coping with ambiguous absence and presence
- Provide workshops aimed at improving reintegration experiences for Reservists that will help with the transition back into the civilian workplace, which is likely an important stabilizing factor for families
- Offer classes that can help families who may be experiencing boundary ambiguity by giving them skills to communicate clearly about family roles, responsibilities, relationships, and routines

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs and services that help Reservists reintegrate into their civilian occupations after returning from deployment
- Promote collaboration among providers and professionals who work with military families to support post-deployment transitions for Reservists and their families
- Recommend training for professionals who work with military families regarding the unique experience of Service members in the Reserve Component

This product is the result of a partnership funded by the Department of Defense between the Office of Military Community and Family Policy and the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture through a grant/cooperative agreement with The University of Minnesota.



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METHODS

- Seven interviews were conducted with Service members and families (spouses or parents). These individuals were recruited through a variety of strategies.
- Participants were asked questions about stressors, coping mechanisms, familial relationships, friendships, and social support.
- Interviews were analyzed using a qualitative thematic review.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participation initially consisted of 16 Service members and 18 family members (12 spouses, 6 parents). Of those who participated in all seven interviews, six were Service members and seven were family members.
- Service members were 29 years old on average (SD = 8.7), and the majority were White (87%) and male (87%).
- Family members were 38 years old on average (SD = 12.5), and most were White (89%) and female (89%).

LIMITATIONS

- Family member participants were spouses of married Reservists and parents of unmarried Reservists. These two sets of family members may have experienced very different deployment and reintegration experiences.
- Those who participated in the study across all seven interviews (n = 13) may differ from those who dropped out (n = 21) in ways not measured in the study, but that still affected the outcome variables. For example, of those who participated in only a portion of the interviews, several reported adjustment and relationship problems.
- The small sample size and limited racial/ethnic diversity limits the generalizability of the findings to a wider military population.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Conduct a longitudinal analysis with families over the course of a deployment cycle to collect data regarding experiences of ambiguity in real time
- Investigate reintegration experiences among a larger and more diverse group of Reservists
- Explore the role of relationship and family quality in the post-deployment reintegration of Service members

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