

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Multiple
Branches

Boundary Ambiguity and Ambivalence in Military Family Reintegration

Hollingsworth, W. G. L., Dolbin-MacNab, M. L., & Marek, L. I. (2016). Boundary ambiguity and ambivalence in military family reintegration. *Family Relations*, 65(4), 603-615. doi:10.1111/fare.12207

SUMMARY: Service members' family functioning may be negatively affected following the return of a Service member. This study examined if Service members' perceived ambivalence related to family, deployment, and boundary ambiguity (e.g., poorly defined family roles) were related to family functioning. Findings revealed that family-related ambivalence, boundary ambiguity, rank, time spent at home, and gender were all related to perceived family functioning.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Service members who reported greater family-related ambivalence post-deployment (e.g., mixed emotions in readjusting to family life) indicated poorer family functioning (e.g., impaired decision making or coping).
- Post-deployment family functioning was poorer among Service members who had greater boundary ambiguity (e.g., unclear household roles), were from lower military ranks, and had spent more time at home.
- Female Service members who experienced greater work- and family-related ambivalence reported poorer family functioning than male Service members.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide education on how military families can adjust family roles and boundaries during reintegration to help families adjust to the Service member's return
- Disseminate information regarding coping skills and decision making for Service members and families to help promote positive family functioning
- Engage Service members and their families in classes that aim to increase communication and conflict-resolution skills prior to and after deployment

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Promote reintegration programs that include assistance to Service members and their families as they adjust to the Service member's return
- Continue to support programs that address the unique challenges faced by low-ranking Service members and female Service members in particular
- Encourage the development and continuation of programs that can promote and support positive family functioning in Service members, their partners and children, especially over an extended period of time

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METHODS

- Surveys were distributed to military families attending Operation: Military Kids, National Guard Yellow Ribbon Program events, and through email by military service providers.
- Military families' perceptions of stress related to household roles (i.e., boundary ambiguity), attitudes regarding deployment and family (i.e., ambivalence), and family functioning during post-deployment were assessed.
- Data were analyzed to examine the relationship of military families' external (e.g., rank, length of deployment) and internal (i.e., boundary ambiguity and ambivalence) factors related to family functioning.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample included 228 Service members (213 male; 15 female) with an average age of 35 years (SD = 7.8, range = 21-55 years).
- Participants were primarily White (n = 195, 86%), had been in a romantic relationship for 10 or more years (n = 123, 54%), and had on average two children per family (SD = 1.09, range = 1-5).
- While the sample included Active Duty, National Guard, and Reserve component military personnel, 126 (55%) participants belonged to the Army National Guard.

LIMITATIONS

- Study measures were limited due to secondary data collection, thus measures may have not adequately captured full perceptions of family functioning, boundary ambiguity, and ambivalence among Service members.
- The sample for this study only included Service members, therefore study findings are limited to an individual's perspective and not the whole military family.
- A majority of participants were part of the Army National Guard, which limits the generalizability of the study's findings to other military components and branches.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Assess how Service members perceive boundary ambiguity and ambivalence in order to further develop measures in this area of research
- Explore additional factors that may connect ambivalence with military family functioning, such as family decision making
- Examine perceptions of boundary ambiguity, ambivalence, and family functioning among all members of a military family

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