

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

Romantic Relationships Following Wartime Deployment

Karakurt, G., Christiansen, A. T., Wadsworth, S. H. M., & Weiss, H. M. (2012). Romantic relationships following wartime deployment. *Journal of Family Issues*, 34(11), 1427-1451. doi:10.1177/0192513x12470799

SUMMARY: U.S. Army Reservists and partners of U.S. Army Reservists were interviewed about their relationships after the Reservists returned from a year-long deployment in Iraq. Qualitative analysis revealed four themes: intermittent idealized closeness, transition from independence to interdependence, transitions in primary sources of social support, and ongoing role renegotiation.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Intermittent idealized closeness (noting only the strengths and not the weaknesses of the relationship/partner) was evident immediately after return and soon gave way to more realistic views. However, for some couples who did not have positive interactions, this gave way to disengagement.
- The transition from independence to interdependence appeared immediately upon return, but waned quickly for couples who had previously experienced deployment and remained a challenge for less experienced couples.
- Participants faced multiple transitions in social support over the year.
- Role renegotiation tended to arise after closeness and transitions were resolved and persisted for some time; these negotiations were more salient for men and appeared to be complicated or prolonged by external demands such as job transitions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate military couples about the dynamic nature of reunion, some of the potential challenges of reunion, and strategies for coping with those challenges
- Provide information to couples about both informal and formal support networks that may be useful during the reintegration phase
- Continue to offer support groups for military families throughout the deployment cycle

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support programs for Reservists during reintegration and make available useful resources such as couples' counseling and other support programs
- Continue to support research exploring the effects of reunion on Service members and their partners
- Encourage the training of professionals to better identify military families who are struggling following a deployment

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METHODS

- Married or cohabitating Midwestern Reservists from a single unit who had been deployed to Iraq for more than a year and their cohabitating heterosexual partners were invited to participate.
- Partners and Reservists were interviewed individually in person or via phone a maximum of seven times in the year following the Reservists' return from deployment at approximately 2, 6, 12, 24, 36, and 52 weeks.
- The semi-structured interviews focused on questions about relationships, stressors, coping mechanisms, physical and psychological challenges, and support networks.

PARTICIPANTS

- Nine Army Reservists (89% male) and 10 partners (90% female) of Reservists who completed at least two waves of interviews were included in the study; eight of each were partnered with each other.
- Reservists had a mean age of 30.3 years (SD = 10.6), were mostly White (89%), and had been in the military an average of 10.3 years (SD = 7.2).
- Partners had a mean age of 35.6 years (SD = 11) and were mostly White (90%).

LIMITATIONS

- The sample size was very small and used a single military unit which greatly limits the generalizability of these findings.
- There was little information about predeployment or deployment factors that may have influenced couple reunion dynamics.
- With the large number of couple interviews, participants missed interviews which may have impacted the findings.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Examine whether these four themes emerge in couples from other military branches
- Examine the relation of these themes to relationship dissolution, satisfaction or functioning
- Explore whether National Guard and Reserves families have more severe problems relative to Active Duty members

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