

“To Be So Connected, Yet Not At All”: Relational Presence, Absence, and Maintenance in the Context of A Wartime Deployment

Maguire, K. C., Heinemann-LaFave, D., & Sahlstein, E. (2013). *Western Journal of Communication*, 77, 249-271.



This article explored the relationship maintenance strategies used by 50 Army wives during a wartime deployment. The data suggest that they use a variety of strategies, and the use of these strategies is impacted by the context of the deployment. For instance, too much webcam usage impeded connection for some of the participants, but was beneficial for others.

Key Findings:

- Army wives use a variety of relationship maintenance strategies during deployment. The circumstances of deployment influence the enactment of the strategies and their potential utility at both an individual and relational level.
- The 2-week R&R period (rest and relaxation time at home) during deployment appeared critical for many participants to reconnect with their spouse.
- Some maintenance activities served as coping methods (e.g., writing thoughts, feelings, and experiences via journals) as a way to stay connected.
- Too much contact in the form of web cams, phones, or intense face to face interactions can impede establishing a sense of connection because the actual or impending physical separation becomes the salient aspect of the interaction.

Implications for Programs:

- Programs could be developed to provide information on the maintenance and coping behaviors that research has found to be helpful for couples.
- Programs during pre-deployment trainings can provide information on how some technology used for communication purposes may have complicated impacts on the individual and relationship. Programs may provide caution on the negative experiences faced by some families with excessive web cam use.

Implications for Policies:

- Support for further research exploring how relationship maintenance and coping behaviors are related to outcomes may be beneficial.
- Policies that allow Service members a variety of ways to communicate with their loved ones may be beneficial.

Avenues for Future Research:

- Longitudinal research of deployment could provide insight into how presence-absence cycles influence the effectiveness of difference maintenance efforts.
- Future research could examine the extent to which these behaviors occur in non-deployment circumstances, and what effect they have on important relational outcomes.



Background Information

Methodology:

- Military chaplains and family readiness group leaders facilitated contact between the researchers and the participants. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling.
- Researchers used a modified version of the Retrospective Interview Technique to gather recollections of the deployment cycle, starting at notification of deployment and ending at time of interview.
- Researchers coded behaviors or cognitions that participants offered in response to an inquiry about how they and/or their spouse maintained their relationship during deployment. Behavior or cognition was coded as maintenance if the narrative indicated it helped preserve the relationship in some way.

Participants:

- 50 women with spouses in the U.S. Army or Army National Guard who were deployed to Iraq (n=22) or Afghanistan (n=26) or who did not reveal where their spouse was deployed (n=2).
- Average age = 31.4 years (SD=7.1, range=18-45).
- Average marriage length = 87.1 months (about 7 years), average number of children =1.6 (SD=1.5), 32% had no children.
- 52% had spouses who were officers, 40% were enlisted, 8% rank not reported.
- 56% of their husbands had completed 1 deployment, 26% had multiple deployments, 18% did not report number of deployments.

Limitations:

- The study was retrospective and this may bias the results.
- The data were cross-sectional and cannot establish causality.
- The sample size is small and limited in scope and may not generalize to other partners of other branches of the military.
- There was a lot of missing demographic data which further impedes the generalizability of the results.

Assessing Research that Works

Research Design and Sample				Quality Rating:	
	Excellent (★★★)	Appropriate (★★★)	Limited (★★★)	Questionable (★★★)	
The design of the study (e.g., research plan, sample, recruitment) used to address the research question was....	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Research Methods				Quality Rating:	
	Excellent (★★★)	Appropriate (★★★)	Limited (★★★)	Questionable (★★★)	
The research methods (e.g., measurement, analysis) used to answer the research question were...	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Limitations				Quality Rating:	
	Excellent Minor Limitations (★★★)	Appropriate Few Limitations (★★★)	Limited Several Limitations (★★★)	Questionable Many/Severe Limitations (★★★)	
The limitations of this study are...	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Implications				Quality Rating:	
	Excellent (★★★)	Appropriate (★★★)	Limited (★★★)	Questionable (★★★)	
The implications of this research to programs, policies and the field, stated by the authors, are...	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable because authors do not discuss implications					
				Overall Quality Rating	