

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

Communication and the Coping Paradox: The Case of Army Spouses and Wartime Deployment

Maguire, K. C., & Parcell, E. S. (2015). Communication and the coping paradox: The case of army spouses and wartime deployment. *Southern Communication Journal*, 80(5), 365-376. doi:10.1080/1041794x.2015.1081973

SUMMARY: This study explored the stressors, coping behaviors, and spousal communication patterns of 40 Army wives whose husbands had recently deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan. The Retrospective Interview Technique was used to collect data. Results indicated six paradoxes that wives experienced as a result of coping with the deployment cycle of their husbands.

KEY FINDINGS:

- A total of six categories of coping paradoxes were identified for the Army wives interviewed, including the paradoxes of avoidance and perceived and impending loss, releasing of emotion and communication issues, maintaining the relationship and relationship work, providing support and emotional contagion, seeking support and social network issues, and independent problem solving and busyness.
- The paradoxes resulted from relationship dilemmas or deployment, and most of them involved communication difficulties.
- Attributing the stress to the context—rather than to the relationship—may help military families to reframe the situation in new ways.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Educate military families on the deployment-related paradoxes they may face, and teach them how they can prepare for the possible occurrence of paradoxes
- Offer training to professionals who work with military families on issues specifically faced by civilian spouses
- Provide outreach services to military families; such outreach could note the availability of potentially useful services and the benefit of getting help early before problems potentially get worse

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Consider the six paradoxes provided to redesign and recreate current military programs to help military families prepare for the deployment cycle by learning new ways to cope with the stress of deployment
- Develop more marriage enrichment programs that can bolster relationship satisfaction and effective communication between couple
- Recommend that Service members be offered family leave during deployment to spend more time with family

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

- The participants were recruited through snowball sampling at a large Army base.
- Semi-structured interviews were used to assess each woman's stressors, coping methods, and spousal communication patterns from the time they first learned of the deployment until the time of the interview.
- Coping paradoxes were identified by labeling coping strategies that actually led to more stress or other unexpected or negative outcomes.

PARTICIPANTS

- The sample included 40 women whose husbands returned from the most recent long-term deployment (six months or longer).
- The average age of the participants was 30.64 years old ($SD = 6.71$); the race information of the participants was absent in the article.
- The husbands were all in the Army: 17 of them served as officers, and 22 served as enlisted Service members (one woman did not report her husband's rank).

LIMITATIONS

- Some factors that could affect Army wives' stressors and coping strategies were not addressed in the study, such as stress level, relationship satisfaction, number of children, etc.
- The sample consisted of Army wives only, so the generalizability to other military branches is limited.
- The study had a small sample ($N=40$) which makes it difficult to generalize the findings.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Collect longitudinal data to examine how the paradoxes change over time
- Interview the deployed spouse and other family members who may also experience paradoxes related to deployment
- Recruit a larger number of participants from different military branches so that the results could be better generalized

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