



Supporting  
Military Families  
Through Research  
and Outreach

# PUTTING RESEARCH TO WORK FOR MILITARY FAMILIES

## 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). *Journal of Family Psychology*, 22(2), 222-230.

<http://www.cfs.purdue.edu/mfri/resources/public/reports/Ambiguous%20Absence.pdf>



ARMY



Reserves



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

### Key Findings:

- Service members and families reported that they had experienced ambiguous absence during deployment, facing 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, Service members and families experienced ambiguous presence, along with difficulty resuming roles and responsibilities, shifting to more open and regular communication, and (for Service members) transitioning from Soldier to civilian.
- For most Service members and families, boundary ambiguity (e.g., issues concerning the Reservist's safety and redistribution of roles and responsibilities) dissipated around 6 weeks following the Reservist's return to civilian employment, which helped to establish a routine for the family.

### Implications for Programs:

- Programs may incorporate curriculum to help prepare families for challenges associated with both deployment and reintegration and teach them skills for coping with ambiguous absence and presence.
- Programs should continue to provide services aimed at improving reintegration experiences for Reservists such as employment skills (i.e. resume writing, interviewing, job searching) that will help with the transition back into the civilian workplace which is likely an important stabilizing factor.
- Clinicians can help families who may be experiencing boundary ambiguity by helping them communicate clearly about family roles, responsibilities, and relationships, and by helping them reestablish routines.

### Implications for Policies:

- Current resources should continue to support programs and services that help Reservists reintegrate into their civilian occupations, particularly during the transition from deployment.
- Policies should continue to support interagency cooperation and coordination that support transition for Reservists and their families.

### Avenues for Future Research:

- Future studies should identify families prior to deployment and collect data about ambiguous absence during deployment (rather than relying on retrospective data).
- Additional research could examine reintegration patterns for a more diverse group of Reservists and their families including non-White and female Reservists.
- Studies should closely examine the role of relationship and family quality in the reintegration of Service members and families.

Prepared by Military REACH Team.

For additional information, please visit <http://reachmilitaryfamilies.arizona.edu>



Developed in Collaboration with the Department of Defense's Office of Family Policy, the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture under Award No. 2009-48667-05833.

## Background Information

### Methodology:

- Seven interviews were conducted with Service members and families (spouses or parents). These individuals were recruited through a variety of strategies and interviews were analyzed using a qualitative thematic review.
- This study focused on Army Reservists and their families.

### Participants:

- Participation initially consisted of 16 Service members and 18 family members (12 spouses, 6 parents). Of those who participated in all 7 interviews, 6 were Service members and 7 were family members.
- Service members were 29 years on average (SD = 8.7), and the majority were White (87%) and male (87%).
- Family members were 38 years on average (SD = 12.5), and most were White (89%) and female (89%).

### Limitations:

- Family member participants were spouses for married Reservists, and parents for 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 ethnic diversity limits the generalizability of the findings to a wider military population.

## 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 <i>Minor Limitations</i> (★★★)	Appropriate <i>Few Limitations</i> (★★☆)	Limited <i>Several Limitations</i> (★☆☆)	Questionable <i>Many/Severe Limitations</i> (☆☆☆)	
The limitations of this study are...	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input checked="" 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 checked="" type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	
<input type="checkbox"/> Not applicable because authors do not discuss implications					
Overall Quality Rating					★★★☆☆

Prepared by Military REACH Team.

For additional information, please visit <http://reachmilitaryfamilies.arizona.edu>