

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

Comfort, Cliques, and Clashes: Family Readiness Groups as Dilemmatic Sites of Relating During Wartime

Parcell, E. S., & Maguire, K. C. (2014). Comfort, cliques, and clashes: Family readiness groups as dilemmatic sites of relating during wartime. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 31(4), 497-515. doi:10.1177/0265407514521766

SUMMARY: Family readiness groups (FRGs) provide resources and support for spouses of deployed Service members, but participation likely comes with both pros and cons. Qualitative interviews with Active Duty Army or Army National Guard wives whose husbands deployed in OIF/OEF gathered information about experiences in FRGs. Some wives found that FRGs provided useful resources and helped them feel included and supported, while other wives found FRGs to be alienating, unhelpful, or a source of stress.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Wives had differing experiences of FRGs, often depending upon engagement, lifestyle choices, and spousal rank; some felt they provided useful coping resources while others viewed them as sources of stress, and some viewed them as confirming their identity as a military wife while others viewed them as unaccepting of alternative identities of lifestyle choices.
- Participants reported that FRG members whose husbands had the highest rank often had greater decision-making power or influence, acceptance within the group, and inside knowledge of military updates.
- Some FRG leaders were overwhelmed by running the groups and recommended drawing clear boundaries between FRGs and spouses' personal lives.
- Some FRGs that promoted a traditional military lifestyle created an atmosphere of exclusion toward spouses who did not have children, did not remain on base during deployment, or had an outside career.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide military spouses with multiple options for receiving support and informative updates (e.g., FRGs, other peer support groups, electronic information distribution)
- Compile and disseminate national and local support and resource information for less traditional military families (e.g., same-sex couples, couples without children, spouses living off-base, dual-career couples)
- Offer workshops for FRG leaders and members to learn suggestions on how to manage FRGs in ways that are respectful, supportive, accepting, and informative for all spouses

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend the appointing of FRG positions based on factors other than spousal rank (e.g., experience, elected by peers)
- Encourage the development of a system for spouses to provide feedback about FRGs without concerns about repercussions
- Promote an FRG structure with multiple leaders to balance the power and flow of information and to reduce the burden on busy leaders

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METHODS

- Researchers used snowball sampling to recruit participants; connections were made to military wives via Army chaplains and FRG leaders.
- Wives of Army or Army National Guard members were interviewed regarding their experiences with deployment and FRGs.
- Participant responses were coded and grouped into common themes.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 50 wives of Army and Army National Guard members; wives were involved in FRGs during their husbands' OEF/OIF deployments from 2003-2005.
- Service members were deployed (18%) or had recently returned from deployment (82%), and they were officers (52%), enlisted (40%), or of unknown rank (8%).
- On average, wives were 32 years of age, had been married 7 years, and had 2 children.
- Wives had experienced either one (70%), two (22%), or three or more (8%) deployments, and many were FRG leaders (32%) or key callers for disseminating information (10%).

LIMITATIONS

- No male spouses were included in the study, and it is unclear how gender may influence experiences in FRGs.
- Participants made up a small, non-random sample with few demographic variables reported, and results may not generalize to other military wives in FRGs.
- Participants may have responded in a way that attempted to portray their FRG relationships in the most positive way possible.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Investigate whether participation in virtual FRGs circumvents some of the reported problems in current FRGs (e.g., power structure, exclusion)
- Conduct a similar study that includes male spouses participating in FRGs to understand possible gender differences in experiences
- Explore the relational dynamics of FRGs using a qualitative approach

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