

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

Turning Points and Trajectories in Military Deployment

Parcell, E. S., & Maguire, K. C. (2014). Turning points and trajectories in military deployment. *Journal of Family Communication*, 14(2), 129-148. doi:10.1080/15267431.2013.864293

SUMMARY: Retrospective interviews were conducted with Army and Army National Guard wives to identify turning points and trajectories of marital satisfaction across the deployment cycle. Participants reported over 500 turning points, and five trajectories of marital satisfaction were identified at each phase of deployment. Results reflect the varied experiences of military families across the deployment cycle.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Participants reported over 500 turning points spanning the deployment cycle, primarily related to deployment or military-related events, life events, and communication events (e.g., disclosures of important information, decisions, disagreements).
- Recall of marital satisfaction across the deployment cycle showed an increase in marital satisfaction from pre-deployment to the time of the interview.
- Within each deployment phase, various patterns of marital satisfaction were present including increasing, decreasing, stable, turbulent, and dipped marital satisfaction.
- The turbulent trajectory of marital satisfaction was most frequent in the pre-deployment and deployment phases. Declining or dipped trajectories were most frequent in the post-deployment phase.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Provide education for couples to support them in successfully navigating the challenges of deployment, including information about common communication challenges across the deployment cycle
- Offer couples retreats post-deployment to facilitate successful reintegration
- Disseminate information regarding resources available to Service members and their families throughout the deployment cycle

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Continue to support couples enrichment activities both pre- and post-deployments
- Recommend that deployed Service members have opportunities for regular telephonic or online communication with at-home family members
- Endorse training for service providers working with military families regarding common communication issues during deployment

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

- Wives were recruited through purposive sampling and snowball sampling via military chaplains, family readiness groups, and through flyers at posted in the military community.
- A retrospective interview technique was used to identify turning points and trajectories of marital satisfaction across the deployment cycle.
- Interviews ranged from 30 minutes to three hours, with an average length of 90 minutes, and took place on base, at the participants home, or in a semi-private location (e.g., coffee shop).

PARTICIPANTS

- Study participants were 50 women whose husbands served in Iraq or Afghanistan as members of the U.S. Army or Army National Guard.
- Participants were 32 years old on average; race/ethnicity data were not provided.
- Most participants' spouses were officers (n = 26) or enlisted Soldiers (n = 20).

LIMITATIONS

- The study utilized retrospective interviews which may produce findings that are influenced by recall bias.
- The results may not generalize to most military families as this was a small, self-selected sample of Army wives
- Only military wives were interviewed; Service members may have a different perspective on turning points and trajectories of marital satisfaction across the deployment cycle.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Use a prospective design to evaluate how different turning points relate to long-term outcomes
- Identify turning points and trajectories associated with successful reintegration
- Explore the effectiveness of family readiness program at reducing turbulent turning points associated with deployment

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