

Putting Research to Work for Military Families



Focus:
Army

Contradictions and Praxis Contextualized by Wartime Deployment: Wives' Perspectives Revealed Through Relational Dialectics

Sahlstein, E., Maguire, K. C., & Timmerman, L. (2009). Contradictions and praxis contextualized by wartime deployment: Wives' perspectives revealed through relational dialectics. *Communication Monographs*, 76(4), 421-442.
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SUMMARY: Strategies that military couples use to manage contradicting experiences or competing demands during deployment may affect their marital satisfaction and personal stress. Contradictions that deployed Soldiers' wives recalled experiencing were coded and organized into themes. Three main contradictions of deployment were identified (i.e., tension between uncertainty and certainty, autonomy and connection, and openness and being closed), and couples managed these contradictions with strategies of denial, balance or compromise, and moving back and forth between conflicting needs.

KEY FINDINGS:

- Army wives experienced three primary contradictions during their husbands' deployments: tension between uncertainty and certainty (pre-deployment), autonomy and connection (deployment), and openness and being closed (post-deployment).
- Participants' recollections revealed they negotiated these conflicts primarily through denial, but their reports also reflected cyclic alternation (i.e., moving back and forth between conflicting needs) and balance or compromise.
- Although spouses were sometimes in agreement as to the use of denial, several instances existed in which the partners disagreed, resulting in conflict that complicated efforts to negotiate the contradictions.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROGRAMS:

Programs could:

- Offer classes to military couples that teach a range of strategies to deal with contradictions that arise during pre-deployment, deployment, and post-deployment
- Educate members of military couples about techniques to manage difficult emotions when dealing with deployment contradictions
- Provide military spouses with training courses teaching skills they may need in order to undertake new responsibilities during deployment (e.g., financial management, household repairs and maintenance)

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICIES:

Policies could:

- Recommend education for professionals working with military families about the contradictions and opposing needs military spouses may experience during each phase of deployment
- Encourage the implementation of awareness campaigns to reduce stigma regarding Service members and their families accessing mental health services
- Promote the use of new technology that increases opportunities for regular communication between deployed Service members and their families

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METHODS

- Spouses of deployed or recently deployed Soldiers were recruited through flyers, announcements at family readiness group meetings, military chaplain referrals, and word-of-mouth.
- Army spouses were interviewed regarding experiences during deployment, marital satisfaction, communication, and changes during deployment, and personal stress.
- Contradictions spouses experienced during deployment and strategies to handle contradictions were identified, coded, and organized into themes.

PARTICIPANTS

- Participants included 50 wives of Active Duty or National Guard Soldiers (52% officers, 40% enlisted, 8% unknown rank) who were currently deployed to (18%) or recently returned from (82%) Iraq (58%), Afghanistan (38%), or an undisclosed location (4%) between 2003-2005.
- On average, Army wives were 32 years old, had been married 7 years, and had 2 children; no race/ethnicity data were provided.
- Soldiers had primarily experienced one (70%) or two (22%) deployments.

LIMITATIONS

- Participants who participated may differ from those who did not participate, especially considering primarily snowball sampling methods.
- Interviews were retrospective and certain biases may have influenced the recall of memories.
- Coding of the type of strategies Army wives used to manage contradictions (e.g., denial, compromise) were determined by researchers, potentially introducing bias.

AVENUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future research could:

- Conduct a similar study in a sample of spouses from all branches of the military, including both male and female military spouses
- Examine the effects of communication patterns and combat disclosure post-deployment on couples' marital satisfaction and individuals' stress and well-being.
- Explore the changes in communication style, marital satisfaction, and personal stress across all phases of deployment in real-time by collecting longitudinal data

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