

# Communication in Military Families Across the Deployment Cycle

*Leanne K. Knobloch*

*University of Illinois*

*Steven R. Wilson*

*Purdue University*

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Since the terrorist attacks on U.S. soil on September 11, 2001, wartime deployment has become a reality for many service members and their loved ones. Communication scholars, clinicians, and civilians need to understand how military families communicate across the deployment cycle for three reasons. First, millions of families in the United States and abroad have been impacted by war over the past decade. Since 2001, approximately 2.5 million active duty and reserve members of the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard have deployed

to Afghanistan and Iraq (Adams, 2013). Approximately 56% of these service members were married at the time of their deployment and left behind spouses, 44% were parents and left behind children (U.S. Department of Defense, 2010), and virtually all left behind parents, siblings, and/or extended family members who worried about their safety. The topics discussed in this chapter have relevance to millions of families not just in the United States but also families of coalition forces as well as families in Afghanistan and Iraq who have seen the effects of war firsthand (MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010).

Second, military deployment reverberates throughout the whole family system. For example, both at-home partners and children shoulder

new roles and responsibilities during a tour of duty, often while worrying about the well-being of the deployed service member and each other (Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008; Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass, 2007). Family members worry because the risks of war are real. Approximately 6,600 American service members have died during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (U.S. Department of Defense, 2013), leaving family members to face intense grief (Chapin, 2011). Another 50,000 American service members have been wounded in action (U.S. Department of Defense, 2013), leaving family members to care for the injured (e.g., Nichols, Martindale-Adams, Graney, Zuber, & Burns, in press). Even when service members return home without visible wounds, nearly 30% screen positive for anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or traumatic brain injury (TBI; Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008), leaving family members to cope with the repercussions of these invisible wounds (Monson, Taft, & Fredman, 2009). Fortunately, the vast majority of returning military personnel readjust well to domestic life, but family members still need to renegotiate roles and disclosure patterns (Faber et al., 2008; Wilson, Wilkum, Chernichky, MacDermid, & Broniarczyk, 2011). Simply put, service members may deploy, but all members of military families are affected by deployment.

A third reason this topic is important to understand is because military culture shapes family communication in unique ways. As Maguire and Wilson (in press) note, “the military creates a culture that values collectivism, hierarchy, structure, authority, and control, and requires service members to place mission readiness above all else” (p. 1). Understanding the military requires fluency in an array of technical terms (e.g., *E-5*, *OEF*, *OCONUS*, *TRICARE*), knowledge of how the chain of command permeates the lives of service members and their families, appreciation of core values such as personal sacrifice and discipline, and respect for those who serve (Blaisure, Saathoff-Wells,

Pereira, MacDermid Wadsworth, & Dombro, 2012; Greene, Buckman, Dandeker, & Greenberg, 2010b). Military culture may inhibit service members from seeking help due to concerns that their superiors or peers may stigmatize them as weak, undisciplined, or disloyal to the mission (Hoge et al., 2004). In addition, military culture may give rise to different connotations of family communication constructs such as *uncertainty* and *conformity orientation* compared to civilian cohorts (e.g., Knobloch & Theiss, 2012; Wilson, Chernichky, Wilkum, & Owlett, 2012). Consequently, scholars cannot apply family communication principles to military families wholesale without considering how those principles may be qualified by military culture.

In this chapter, we synthesize communication research to illuminate how military families interact across the deployment cycle. Several programs of research on communication in military families are underway, but the promise of this work has yet to be fully realized. Our goal is to facilitate the growth of the literature by organizing what is known and unknown about communication processes within military families. We set the stage for our review by delineating the unique features of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and describing the effects of deployment on military families. Next, we employ the emotional cycle of deployment model (Pincus, House, Christenson, & Adler, 2001) as a framework for summarizing research on how military families communicate across the stages of deployment. We conclude by sketching directions for future research geared toward advancing theory and better supporting military families.

## Unique Features of the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq

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The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq differ from prior U.S. military involvements in several respects. As Tanielian and Jaycox (2008) noted, “[p]robably the signal difference of the conflicts

in Afghanistan and Iraq is that they mark the first time that the United States has attempted to fight an extended conflict with a post-Cold War all-volunteer force” (p. 22). Although both Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) were characterized by early U.S. victories, both conflicts became protracted, and the United States responded with troop surges to Iraq in 2007 and to Afghanistan in 2009. These surges strained American forces such that repeated deployments became necessary. Of the 2.5 million U.S. military personnel who have served in Afghanistan and Iraq, approximately 825,000 (33%) have deployed two or more times, and 400,000 (16%) have deployed three or more times (Adams, 2013). Deployment length varies by branch of service, but in many cases, troop surges resulted in longer tours with less time at home in between. For example, although Army policy specifies that deployments should not exceed 12 months with 24 months of time at home in between, deployments during the troop surge in Iraq were extended to 15 months, and many units were redeployed after being home for only 12 to 18 months (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). Of course, repeated deployments with shorter times at home create stress not just for service members but also for their families (e.g., Chandra et al., 2010; Mansfield et al., 2010).

A second unique aspect of the current conflicts is the unprecedented role played by U.S. National Guard and Reserve personnel. During the past decade, *civilian soldiers* or *weekend warriors* have been transformed from a strategic reserve that responds to domestic disasters to an operational force that is activated as needed (Blaisure et al., 2012). Approximately 30% of troops serving in Afghanistan and Iraq come from National Guard and Reserve units (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). Reservists tend to be older than active duty forces; indeed, the proportion of service members 45 years of age and older is five times higher in reserve than active duty units (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). Reservists and their families face unique challenges across the deployment cycle, particularly because they are not

embedded in military communities that offer understanding and support (Blaisure et al., 2012). A lack of integration into military communities may explain why National Guard and Reserve members screen positive for PTSD and other mental health issues at higher rates after deployment compared to active duty service members (Milliken, Auchterlonie, & Hoge, 2007).

Third, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have exacerbated a growing military-civilian divide. More than 11% of the U.S. population served in World War II, so nearly every American knew a warfighter personally, but only 0.8% of the U.S. population has served in Afghanistan and Iraq (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). Accordingly, “a smaller share of Americans currently serve in the U.S. Armed Forces than at any time since the peace-time era between World Wars I and II” (Pew Research Center, 2011, p. 1). This trend, plus the phasing out of the draft in 1973, has produced a generational gap in family connections to the military. In a Pew Research Center survey (2011), more than 75% of adults 50 years of age and older reported that an immediate family member (i.e., parent, sibling, spouse, or child) had served or was currently serving in the military, whereas only 33% of adults 18 to 29 years of age did so. One consequence of the growing military-civilian divide is that many veterans (77%) and civilians (71%) feel the general public does not understand the problems faced by service members (Pew Research Center, 2011). These numbers highlight both the challenges of military life and the need for knowledge about how military families communicate across the deployment cycle.

## Effects of Deployment on Military Families

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Military personnel mobilized for OEF and OIF are incredibly resilient in the wake of deployment stressors (Bonanno et al., 2012), but a tour of duty can take a significant toll on service members. Upwards of 80% of combat infantry troops

deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq have reported receiving artillery fire, with upwards of 66% having reported receiving small arms fire (Hoge et al., 2004). The prevalence rates of PTSD increased 4-fold to 7-fold among military personnel deployed after the 9/11 terrorist attacks (Seal et al., 2009). Moreover, the rates of self-reported symptoms of major depression, PTSD, and alcohol misuse are significantly higher among combat infantry soldiers after returning home from deployment to Afghanistan or Iraq compared to rates of symptoms reported by members of similar units before deployment (Hoge et al., 2004). Deployments of longer duration also predict more alcohol misuse (Allison-Aipa, Ritter, Sikes, & Ball, 2010; see also Milliken et al., 2007). All of these statistics underscore how challenging deployment can be for service members.

At-home partners also display notable strength during in the wake of deployment (MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010; Park, 2011), reflected in 50% of civilian spouses responding to the Survey of Army Families (SAF-V) reporting that they were coping well or very well with a current separation (Orthner & Rose, 2005b). Without question, however, deployment can be taxing for at-home partners. Army wives whose husbands deployed to Afghanistan or Iraq for 1 to 11 months used mental health services at a 19% higher rate compared to Army wives whose husbands did not deploy, and Army wives whose husbands were away for more than 11 months used mental health services at a 27% higher rate (Mansfield et al., 2010). Notably, the strain of deployment may escalate the longer the separation lasts. At-home parents who have experienced more months of deployment report worse emotional well-being, more hassles, and more parental distress (Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2012; Lester et al., 2010). These findings highlight the demands of deployment for at-home partners.

Although military children, too, demonstrate remarkable resiliency during deployment (Lester et al., 2010; Orthner & Rose, 2005a; Park, 2011), a parent's tour of duty can be stressful for youth of all ages. Deployment corresponds

with elevated rates of child maltreatment (Gibbs, Martin, Kupper, & Johnson, 2007; Rentz et al., 2007) and may have detrimental effects on academic achievement, particularly in mathematics (Engel, Gallagher, & Lyle, 2010). Deployment also can engender emotional and behavioral problems (Chandra et al., 2010; Lipari, Winters, Matos, Smith, & Rock, 2010). For example, when a parent is away on a tour of duty compared to home, children are 18% more likely to be diagnosed with a behavioral disorder and 19% more likely to be diagnosed with a stress disorder (Gorman, Eide, & Hisle-Gorman, 2010). These numbers are especially striking because children are 11% less likely to visit an outpatient health clinic at all during deployment compared to when the family is intact, perhaps because sole caregivers need to be selective making trips to the doctor (Gorman et al., 2010). Increases in the number and duration of a parent's deployment correspond with more emotional and behavioral difficulties for youth as well (Chandra et al., 2010; Lester et al., 2010). Clearly, deployment can have detrimental outcomes for military children.

Robust evidence accentuates the burdens of deployment, but a tour of duty can be beneficial for military couples and their children in several ways. In a study of Army soldiers who had recently returned home from a peacekeeping mission to Bosnia, 77% of participants reported positive consequences of deployment, including earning additional money, growing stronger as a person, and having time away to think and reflect (Newby et al., 2005). Similarly, reserve component family members who had experienced a post-9/11 deployment identified positive outcomes such as increased family closeness, financial gain, pride in civic service, more confidence, a new awareness of global issues, and more clarity about their priorities (Castaneda et al., 2008; Wheeler & Torres Stone, 2010). Military children describe benefits such as cultivating their independence, building family cohesion, serving as a confidant for the at-home parent, having the service member recognize their new maturity upon reunion, and preparing for future deployments

(Knobloch, Pusateri, Ebata, & McGlaughlin, in press-b; Wilson et al., 2011). Contrary to conventional wisdom, deployment also may buffer against marital dissolution (Karney & Crown, 2011). All of these findings indicate that deployment can provide opportunities for personal and dyadic growth.

Without a doubt, the stressors posed by deployment can have significant detrimental consequences for service members, at-home partners, and children. At the same time, many military families are resilient across the deployment cycle and identify positive consequences of their experience. A critical question arises from this paradox: What are the parameters that predict whether military families struggle or thrive across the deployment cycle? Of course, one piece of the puzzle lies in the sources of support available to military families (e.g., Huebner, Mancini, Bowen, & Orthner, 2009). A second piece of the puzzle, and one that we find especially compelling as family communication scholars, lies in the interaction dynamics within families (Sahlstein, Maguire, & Timmerman, 2009; Wilson et al., 2011). We devote the following section to describing the communication processes relevant to military families across the deployment cycle.

## Family Communication Across the Deployment Cycle

Scholars have long recognized the utility of conceptualizing deployment as a sequential process that occurs via recognizable stages of progression. Perhaps the most widely known process framework is the *emotional cycle of deployment model* proposed by Pincus et al. (2001), a team of military psychiatrists who constructed their model based on their professional practice, their personal experience, and their reading of the research literature. Although the model has not been the target of substantial empirical evaluation, it has fulfilled Pincus et al.'s (2001) vision "for use as a tool in education, intervention, and research"

(p. 15). The model divides the deployment cycle into five stages that span from preparing for departure (the pre-deployment stage), to the separation itself (the deployment stage and then the sustainment stage), and finally to reunion (the re-deployment stage and then the post-deployment stage). The crux of the model's logic is that military families who are unable to meet the challenges embedded in each stage will experience distress. In the subsections that follow, we summarize the model's description of each stage, and then we review the communication research relevant to that part of the trajectory.

### Preparing for Departure

The *pre-deployment stage* begins when the service member receives deployment orders and concludes when he or she departs for the mission; the length of this stage is variable and can range from several weeks to many months. The initial shock of deployment orders may be accompanied by feelings of denial, distress, and loss. These emotional difficulties may be compounded by the logistical demands of preparing for the service member's departure. In addition to long hours of extensive training for service members, military families must tackle a formidable list of domestic tasks (e.g., financial planning, will preparation, child care arrangements) plus carve out opportunities to spend quality time together. Tensions may run high if service members privilege the upcoming mission over fostering closeness, if family members hide their grief behind a cyclone of anger, or if children respond to the impending departure with temper tantrums or anxiety-laden behavior.

#### *Managing Uncertainty.*

Very little work has examined how military families communicate as they ready for deployment, but three interview studies suggest that the weeks leading up to departure can be filled with uncertainty. Wiens and Boss (2006) observed

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time for personal interests, reframing stressors as opportunities, maximizing productivity while minimizing negative emotion, and avoiding news reports about the dangers of war (Lapp et al., 2010; Villagran, Canzona, & Ledford, in press; Wheeler & Torres Stone, 2010). Of course, some coping strategies are more effective than others. For example, military wives report better mental health when they cope by actively working to resolve their difficulties or by remaining optimistic (Dimiceli et al., 2010; Padden et al., 2011). People's coping strategies may play a key role in how they fare during deployment.

### *Communicating Across Continents.*

Other research has investigated the communication dynamics between deployed service members and at-home family members. Military personnel, particularly those who are married, expect to be able to communicate frequently with family members at home during a tour of duty, but they end up disappointed if they do not have as much access to communication technology as they expected (Schumm, Bell, Ender, & Rice, 2004). Lack of access can stem from unreliable technology, scarce equipment, prohibitive expense, and channel closures after security breaches (Greene, Buckman, Dandeker, & Greenberg, 2010a; Schumm et al., 2004).

Communication bridging the warzone and the home front can be both helpful and harmful to family morale (Greene et al., 2010a; Warner et al., 2007). On one hand, supportive and constructive exchanges can build intimacy, provide comfort, allay fears, and counteract loneliness. Parents and children can connect during special occasions such as birthdays and holidays, and all family members can rest assured that their loved ones are functioning effectively. On the other hand, communication exchanges that are conflict-laden or unpleasant can exacerbate an already-stressful situation. Problematic communication episodes can distract military personnel from their mission, make at-home family members feel guilty about adding to the service member's burden, and

increase feelings of helplessness and isolation for everyone involved.

The outcomes of communication among military family members during deployment are contingent on many factors, including features of the exchanges, motives of the interactants, and characteristics of relationships. With respect to the amount and content of communication, Ferrier-Auerbach, Erbes, Polusny, Rath, and Sponheim (2010) observed that National Guard soldiers deployed to Iraq reported more generalized distress when they had infrequent or unsupportive communication with friends and family members at home. With respect to the motivations underlying people's behavior, Joseph and Afifi (2010) found that military wives who withheld disclosures to shield their husbands from worry experienced worse physical and mental health. With respect to qualities of relationships, Carter et al. (2011) identified marital satisfaction as a moderator. For service members with high marital satisfaction, overall frequency of communication with their spouse during deployment corresponded with less PTSD symptoms upon homecoming, but for service members with low marital satisfaction, more frequent delayed communication (i.e., letters, care packages, email messages) with their spouse during deployment corresponded with more PTSD symptoms during reintegration. All of this evidence showcases the complexities of the association between people's communication during deployment and their personal and relational well-being.

A comprehensive understanding of the interaction dynamics that link service members in theatre and loved ones at home also requires attention to what military families do *not* talk about. Indeed, family members may strategically withhold information from each other during deployment (Joseph & Afifi, 2010; Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Theiss, in press). Avoided topics include negative behaviors, conflict-riddled issues, dangers experienced during deployment, confidential military information, and feelings of distress (Frisby, Byrnes, Mansson, Booth-Butterfield, & Birmingham, 2011;

Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Theiss, in press; Owlett et al., 2012). Topic avoidance may be perpetuated by and directed toward multiple targets, including deployed service members, at-home partners, children, and social network members (Owlett et al., 2012).

Topic avoidance during deployment may stem from desires to safeguard others from anxiety and to circumvent face threats to self and others. For example, military wives tend to conceal their concerns during deployment if they consider their husband to be in danger in the warzone or unsupportive of their disclosures (Joseph & Afifi, 2010). Moreover, military adolescents report that topic avoidance within their families is motivated to shield themselves or others from anxiety or because talking about the issue would be futile (Owlett et al., 2012). Military youth recognize that censoring information allows adults to mask the dangers of deployment and to ensure that children receive developmentally appropriate details (Knobloch, Pusateri, Ebata, & McGlaughlin, in press-a; Owlett et al., 2012). These findings underscore the nuances underlying people's decisions to share or withhold information during deployment.

### *Maintaining Relationships.*

A related body of work has examined how military families preserve intimacy during deployment. Military families generally seek to keep the service member psychologically present in the household despite his or her physical absence (Wiens & Boss, 2006), but maintaining relationships during a tour of duty reflects a delicate balance between sustaining bonds versus cultivating autonomy. For example, Sahlstein et al. (2009) found that Army wives face a tension between preserving a connection with their deployed husband versus developing their own independence. Although wives wanted to foster interdependence with their spouse, they also sought to live their own lives and bolster their independence (Sahlstein et al., 2009). Thus, relationship maintenance during deployment

requires the ability to navigate competing goals (Maguire, Heinemann-LaFave, & Sahlstein, 2013; Sahlstein et al., 2009).

Research has delineated the strategies military spouses use to maintain their relationship during deployment. Three relational maintenance strategies were apparent from interviews Merolla (2010) and Maguire et al. (2013) conducted with wives of deployed military personnel. *Intrapersonal strategies* included behaviors that wives enacted individually, such as cherishing mementos, thinking positively, becoming self-reliant, praying, counting their blessings, journaling, imagining interactions with their husband, planning for the future, recalibrating their perception of time, and visiting meaningful places. *Partner interaction strategies* involved communication between partners, including sending gifts, debriefing each other about daily events, avoiding topics of conflict, expressing affection, maintaining communication routines, planning for the future, sharing openly, reassuring each other about their safety, communicating positively, talking about spiritual beliefs, carving out quality time together, giving and receiving support, affirming commitment, collaborating on tasks, and creating distance when needed. *Social network strategies* encompassed support from individuals external to the relationship, including receiving help from friends and family, talking about the absent person, being social, focusing on children, becoming involved in military family support groups, and withdrawing when necessary.

An intriguing finding from both Merolla's (2010) and Maguire et al.'s (2013) data is that some relational maintenance strategies have unintended negative consequences for military families. For example, mediated communication channels can be a double-edged sword: Wives were thankful for opportunities to connect with their husbands in real time, but they also reported a lack of availability, reliability, and privacy inherent in the technology (Maguire et al., 2013; Merolla, 2010). Wives also recounted episodes in which their use of a relational maintenance

strategy produced an outcome that violated their expectations, increased their stress, or overwhelmed them with too much contact (Maguire et al., 2013). Hence, these results illustrate the challenges of maintaining close ties during a tour of duty.

## Reunion

The emotional cycle of deployment model assigns two stages to the reunion period. The *re-deployment stage* indexes the month before the service member's expected homecoming. It can be a time of eager anticipation coupled with apprehension about reunion. Returning service members and at-home partners may wonder about their ability to renew their connection while preserving their autonomy. This stage also may be marked by a flurry of domestic activity. Indeed, family members may throw themselves into preparations for the service member's arrival and attend to household tasks that languished during the separation. Expectations for reunion are likely to mount for all family members.

The *post-deployment stage* begins with homecoming and typically lasts 3 to 6 months afterward. The reunion day can be intensely joyful, especially if the military unit returns home to ceremonial festivities, but it can be less than idyllic if last-minute changes in arrival plans prevent family members from being present to greet the returning service member. In the days and weeks following the reunion, military families may experience a honeymoon period characterized by vacation days, special celebrations, and quality time together.

Eventually, the honeymoon period may give way to unexpected stressors. Returning service members may be caught off guard by the changes that occurred at home, the milestones they missed, and the challenges of acclimating to a new domestic routine. At-home partners may be reluctant to yield their personal space and their decision-making power. Moreover, if returning service members are unable or unwilling help

with household responsibilities, at-home partners may grow increasingly resentful. Children may have difficulty relating to the returning service member, reject discipline attempts, display separation anxiety, or appear distant. Notably, some military families may be just settling into a comfortable routine when it is time to think about a subsequent deployment.

### *Managing Relational Uncertainty.*

Work drawing on the relational turbulence model has highlighted the process of managing relational uncertainty as instrumental during reunion (Knobloch & Theiss, in press). *Relational uncertainty* refers to the questions people experience about the definition of a relationship (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011). According to the relational turbulence model, relational uncertainty generates upheaval during times of transition because individuals lack information to produce and process messages effectively. Returning service members and at-home partners grapple with several issues of relational uncertainty upon homecoming, including questions about maintaining commitment, reintegrating daily activities, addressing household stressors, acclimating to personality changes, coordinating sexual relations and resolving questions about infidelity, preserving the health of the service member, and communicating effectively (Knobloch & Theiss, 2012). Military adolescents contend with questions about the service member's activities during deployment, why the service member joined the military and deployed, how to navigate family life, and the possibility of future deployments (Knobloch, Pusateri, et al., in press-a).

Relational uncertainty complicates communication during the post-deployment transition. For example, returning service members and at-home partners experiencing relational uncertainty upon reunion are less willing to maintain their relationship using strategies such as offering assurances and communicating openly (Theiss & Knobloch, in press-a). They also avoid

talking about sensitive topics (Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Theiss, in press), view their mate as less responsive to their needs (Theiss & Knobloch, in press-a), and have difficulty adjusting to reintegration (Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Ogolsky, in press). Military personnel grappling with relational uncertainty upon homecoming report more aggressive and less open communication behavior (Theiss & Knobloch, in press-b), and they are less satisfied with their romantic relationship (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011). Taken together, this evidence implies that managing relational uncertainty is a key task for military couples during reunion.

### *Coordinating Daily Routines.*

*Interference from partners* occurs when a partner disrupts an individual's everyday routines (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011). The relational turbulence model argues that times of transition are ripe for people to hinder each other's daily goals, and in turn, experience upheaval in their relationship (Knobloch & Theiss, in press). Indeed, the post-deployment transition provides many opportunities for family members to interfere with each other's everyday routines. Military couples contend with disruptions tied to negotiating everyday routines, completing domestic responsibilities, distributing control, maintaining independence, parenting, dealing with differences between partners, coordinating social networks and social activities, and prioritizing time together (Knobloch & Theiss, 2012; see also Faber et al., 2008). Military youth also report trouble assimilating the returning service member back into daily life, particularly adapting to new discipline patterns and accommodating a new member of the household (Knobloch, Pusateri, et al., in press-a).

Individuals who perceive frequent disruptions from their partner communicate less effectively during reintegration. Recently-reunited military couples experiencing interference from partners employ less constructive conflict management strategies (Theiss & Knobloch, in press-a), view

their relationship as more turbulent (Theiss & Knobloch, in press-a), and report more trouble dealing with reintegration (Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Ogolsky, in press). Returning service members communicate in more aggressive and less open ways when encountering interference from partners (Theiss & Knobloch, in press-b); not surprisingly, they also report less relationship satisfaction (Knobloch & Theiss, 2011). These studies suggest that coordinating everyday routines may help military couples communicate effectively when reunited after a tour of duty.

### *Negotiating Communicative Dilemmas.*

Other scholarship has considered the challenges posed by communication during reunion. One such dilemma involves navigating the tension between communicating openly versus maintaining privacy. For example, military couples have to readjust to consulting each other about day-to-day decisions that they made independently during deployment (Faber et al., 2008). Recently reunited couples also face a delicate balance in deciding what information to reveal or conceal about their time apart. Disclosing sensitive details about what happened during the separation may cause worry, tension, or conflict, but withholding information may create distance between partners (Sahlstein et al., 2009). Reconstructing functional levels of disclosure is even more difficult if the returning service member is psychologically distant, managing visible or invisible wounds, preoccupied with memories of the deployment, or prefers to spend time with comrades from the unit (e.g., Sayers, 2011; Wiens & Boss, 2006).

Persuading a returning service member to seek help for a mental health problem is a complex conversation as well. If unit comrades decide to broach the topic with a returning service member, their message is more likely to be successful if it (a) conveys credibility; (b) emphasizes respect, trust, and positive outcomes; and (c) avoids using pejorative language or casting mental

illness in a negative light (Clark-Hitt, Smith, & Broderick, 2012). Military family members also encounter a difficult task if they need to persuade a returning service member to seek help for a mental health problem. They must juggle multiple goals such as gaining compliance, guarding against threats to their own face and the service member's face, communicating openly, expressing support, circumventing conflict, fostering a collaborative climate, and surmounting perceptions of stigma or diminished work productivity (Wilson, Dorrance Hall, & Gettings, 2013; Wilson, Gettings, & Dorrance Hall, 2013). Military family members face dilemmas from conflicting goals such as (a) emphasizing that the returning service member needs help without appearing unsupportive, and (b) wanting the returning service member to regain happiness while also being willing to listen to him or her vent about troubles (Wilson, Gettings, et al., 2013). In sum, both military colleagues and family members must contend with a host of complicated, sensitive, and face-threatening issues when urging a returning service member to solicit assistance for a mental health problem.

Helping military youth adjust to reintegration requires sophisticated communication as well. Some military adolescents interviewed by Knobloch, Pusateri, et al. (in press-a) said that reunion matched their expectations, others admitted to being disappointed that the service member's arrival did not live up to their idyllic vision of what homecoming would be like, and still others commented that they did not expect the returning service member to be so exhausted or so ill-tempered. Military youth who participated in focus groups conducted by Mmari et al. (2009) noted that getting reacquainted can be stressful if the returning service member has trouble appreciating the ways they have grown, matured, and contributed to the household during deployment. According to a survey study by Wilson et al. (2012), a family's communication patterns may play a role in how military children adjust to reunion: When deployed parents perceived a free and open exchange of ideas by

all family members, they reported that their eldest child displayed fewer behavioral problems and more constructive behavior during reintegration. In total, military youth appear to fare better during reunion if the returning service member communicates with sensitivity to their needs.

## Future Directions

This chapter examined communication across the deployment cycle to shed light on why military families may struggle or thrive during each stage. Our review revealed strands of communication research focused on how military families (a) manage uncertainty while preparing for departure; (b) cope with stress, communicate across continents, and maintain relationships during the separation; and (c) manage relational uncertainty, coordinate daily routines, and negotiate communicative dilemmas upon reunion. Moving forward, we see a need for more insight into diverse family forms. Most military family research has investigated traditional family configurations (e.g., deployed husbands/fathers, at-home wives/mothers), which reflects the structure of the U.S. armed forces to some extent. Approximately 85.5% of active duty and 82.0% of reserve component service members are male (U.S. Department of Defense, 2011). Yet these numbers mask greater underlying diversity. According to the same report, approximately 11.5% of married active duty personnel are married to another service member, and 47.3% of married female active duty personnel are part of a dual-military couple. Moreover, approximately 6.9% of all service members are single parents with children, and 32.9% of active duty single parents are female. Finally, 30.2% of active duty and 24.3% of reserve component personnel self-identify as a member of a racial/ethnic minority group (U.S. Department of Defense, 2011). Many questions remain about how family communication processes may differ when mothers, dual-military couples, single parents, service members

of color, or lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) service members deploy.

We also emphasize the need to move beyond questions about the amount or channel of family communication during deployment to investigate attributes of more and less successful communication during each stage. Caughlin's (2010) multiple goals theory of personal relationships seems especially promising in this regard. Indeed, multiple goals theory offers a framework for (a) defining communication quality in this context as the degree to which messages attend to multiple goals salient at each stage of the deployment cycle, (b) investigating how family members respond to each other's messages based on their inferences about each other's goals, and (c) explaining how messages and goal inferences shape the relationship satisfaction of military family members over time.

Prospective research that follows multiple family members over the full deployment cycle is imperative, given that most studies have gathered cross-sectional or retrospective data from a single family member. Longitudinal data would be helpful for (a) empirically testing claims from the emotional cycle of deployment model about the emotions and behaviors that typify each stage, (b) distinguishing different trajectories of family communication over time, (c) clarifying how people's expectations and behaviors during one stage affect their relationship satisfaction during subsequent stages, and (d) illuminating what types of support, resources, and interventions are helpful from pre-deployment through post-deployment. Gathering data from multiple family members would reveal the unique perspectives that deployed parents, at-home parents, and children have on these issues (e.g., Wilson et al., 2012).

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## Conclusion

Addressing these directions for future research will remain important for years to come. The United States will have a continued military

presence across the globe for the foreseeable future, and new conflicts are always possible. Families caring for service members who are dealing with visible or invisible wounds, or who are struggling with reintegration into domestic life, need continued support (Nichols et al., in press). The size of the U.S. military is projected to shrink, which will result in many more veterans returning to civilian communities. In the words of First Lady Michelle Obama (Hussain, 2010):

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If Americans respond to this challenge; if we mobilize every segment of society; if we work together; if we hold ourselves to the same high standard of excellence that our military families live by every day, then I know we can succeed. I know we can realize our vision of an America that truly supports and engages our military families not just now, but for decades to come.

Family communication scholars are well-positioned to help make this vision a reality by level < the paragraph continues here, do not indent this line > milit during times of war and peace.

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