“CHANGING ROUTINES”: AN EXPLORATION OF PARENTAL STRESS AND CHILD ADJUSTMENT DURING A MILITARY DEPLOYMENT

By

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ABSTRACT

A qualitative exploration surveyed 12 military parents about their experiences throughout the deployment cycle, including parental stress and child adjustment. The purpose of this study was to gather rich, personal responses via open-ended surveys conveying the effects military deployment has on families. Military families are a unique and diverse demographic with many risk and resilience factors affecting their daily lives and development. This study found five internal themes (parental stress, changes in routine, loss of support, child adjustment, and family resilience) and two external themes (time and the COVID-19 pandemic) reported by parents related to their deployment experiences. These findings build off existing literature and use theoretical frameworks to increase the understanding of military family experiences. In addition to the reports of hardships and increased stress, this study had novel findings regarding the COVID-19 pandemic and the toll it had on deployed military families.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Military service members make up a small but growing population within the United States; approximately 2.5 million men and women serve as active duty and reserve personnel, not including veterans (Clever & Segal, 2013). Although service members are considered to be a small population, their families greatly increase the population of military-connected personnel. Active duty military families add almost 2 million people to the population, with over half being dependent children. To include Guard and Reserve families would increase the military family population by another million with 70% of that being dependent children. According to Clever and Segal (2013) there is a growing number of military family members, outnumbering military personnel by 1.4 to 1, with the largest group of dependent children being between birth and five years of age.

The military environment is a unique demographic, including families with many contextual factors that increase the diversity among family forms (Clever & Segal, 2013). The military has many rules and guidelines that may add to daily stressors many families face. For active duty families, deployment is an inevitable stressor that disrupts their lives and upheaves the family system causing behavioral (Barker & Berry, 2009) and emotional changes among each family member, especially young children (Lester et al., 2010). Research has focused on the adverse effects of deployment for the military service member, including PTSD (DeVoe et al., 2018) and trouble adjusting to integrating back into the family. There is little qualitative research on the effects of deployment for the spouses and children left behind during deployment. With the number of dependent children increasing among military families, researching the effects deployment has on their attachment to their parents, both the deployed and non-deployed parent,

as well as, the behavioral changes they may experience is critical for understanding their development within these unique contexts.

The purpose of this research is to explore the effects of deployment on military families, specifically considering the attachment styles of dependent children and adolescents. Some of the key issues many families face going through the deployment cycle range from changes in mental health status, including depression and anxiety, behavioral issues, including acting out and regressive behaviors, and emotional attachment issues among young children. There may be a shift in roles among parents causing additional stress on the at-home parent and the dependent children. The literature review will examine past research on children within military families and examine the attachment issues and behavioral changes children experience throughout the deployment cycle.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Military Families and Deployment Cycles

In this study, military deployment is defined as the movement of service members outside of the United States to a combat zone or areas that require increased security or peacekeeping (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs). Deployment may last anywhere from 90 days to 15 months and is considered to be a cyclic event, with the three main cycles being: pre-deployment, deployment, and reintegration (Louie and Cromer, 2014). Pre-deployment is the notice that the service member is going to be deployed; this typically involves a short period of preparation for the service member and their family. Deployment is the time in which the service member is out of the country. Reintegration, or post-deployment, involves the service member returning home and adjusting back into the home environment (Louie & Cromer, 2014).

With each phase of the deployment cycle comes new stressors for the family, including: preparing for combat, both mentally and physically for the service member, preparing as a family, discussing what changes will happen while the service member parent is away (Louie & Cromer, 2014), and for the family at home, waiting during the deployment. Each stage may cause different distress and emotions to each individual family member. Pre-deployment may be most stressful for younger children because they may not fully understand what is going on (DeVoe & Ross, 2012). During the deployment, the at-home parent worries about the safety of the deployed parent while the deployed parent reports being concerned about their families back home yet also feeling detached (Zanotti et al., 2016). Reintegration may also be filled with mixed emotions, including the excitement to be home and reunited as a family, as well as, many uncertainties as the family adjusts to family roles changing (DeVoe & Ross, 2012). All of these

individual stressors and worries compound together, impacting the family functioning (Zanotti, et al., 2016).

Theoretical Perspectives on Deployment

This research study is supported by attachment and family systems perspectives. The use of theoretical backgrounds organizes the complexity of family phenomena in such a way that we can understand them (Smith & Hamon, 2017). The two theories applied to this study provide background knowledge of parent-child relationships and family systems and can contribute to the understanding of the findings within this research. Using theory within research is best defined as "an attempt to explain or solve a piece of the puzzle," (Bengston et al., 2005, p.5). Research regarding families benefits from the use of family theories because of their ability to distinguish between aspects of families and how they work and understand phenomena rather than other social groups.

Family Systems Theory

Family systems theory views the boundaries between a family within its environment and the internal boundaries between family members as they relate to the functional effectiveness of a family, (Smith & Hamon, 2017). Family systems theory utilizes a circular causality model (Smith & Hamon, 2017) which focuses on the relationship between two events, their reciprocity, and the interpretations of those relationships. In the context of military families, deployment causes stress on the parents and children individually, but also between family members. Thus, circular causality occurs when parents' stress causes children's stress, and vice versa. Invoking a family systems perspective shifts the focus from an individualistic viewpoint to a conceptualization of the interactional patterns between the family relationships during deployment.

Family systems are influenced by their communication; these communication processes allow families to create, modify, and maintain a system's goals as well as to control individuals' behaviors, (Broderick, 1993). Communication during the deployment cycle can be critical for families' well-being. During the deployment cycle, families adjust and find new ways of communicating, such as through video chatting, phone calls, and writing letters. Family systems are also goal-seeking, self-regulating systems in which the focus is the holistic quality of the family rather than the individual members, (Smith & Hamon, 2017). Throughout the deployment cycle, families work towards maintaining balance and planning for the end-goal of healthy reintegration (DeVoe & Ross, 2012).

Family systems thrive on predictable patterns of functioning that maintain the homeostasis of the family; within military contexts, deployment is a change in the family system that causes stress and threatens to disrupt the homeostasis of the family (Thompson et al., 2017). Family systems theory, as applied to military families, suggests a cascade model for individual behaviors on the functioning of the family as a whole, with reciprocal links between individual and family wellness outcomes (Snyder et al., 2016). For example, parental PTSD symptoms have been associated with child internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Snyder et al., 2016), supporting the idea of the family systems' cascade model. Similarly, positive individual behaviors are also influential for the entire family. For example, when returning from deployment, fathers may plan to better their parenting skills, understand the family needs (Walsh et al., 2014), and increase involvement in the care of their children (Posada et al., 2015), which will have an impact on the family system (Mallette et al., 2020).

Attachment Theory

Attachment theory was created as a confirmation of the importance of the child's tie to the mother or caretakers, which emphasized the importance of the affectional bonds of family members that begin in childhood and adolescence (Bowlby, 1978). Any temporary or permanent disturbance of these bonds, as well as how such disturbance is handled within the family, is considered to have substantial impact to individual and family outcomes. Deployment is considered a disturbance that disrupts the parent-child attachment bond. Attachment theory supports research findings on the importance of parent-child relationships in military families. Deployment can challenge attachment relationships by directly separating children from the deployed parent for prolonged periods of time and indirectly by creating stressful demands on the at-home parent's quality of care (Posada et al., 2015). Lowe et al (2012) supported that relational attachments between the at-home parent and child are negatively impacted by the greater length of deployment.

Attachment bonds are formed during a critical period of development, which is why it is imperative to prepare young children for the deployment of their parent. Attachment bonds may include: avoidant, in which they avoid attachment and interaction with their caregivers and show no distress at separation; secure, in which the child is trusting of the parents and adapts to separation; ambivalent, children are wary of strangers due to inconsistent care; and disorganized, in which children lack readily observable intentions (Bowlby, 1978). Pre-deployment is a time to bolster attachment bonds between the parent and child, (Louie & Cromer, 2014) by preparing ways to maintain and reassure their perceived access to their deploying caregiver (Louie & Cromer, 2014). Secure attachments lead to positive and supportive relationships with others, while avoidant attachment styles lead to negative relationships and the inability to build close bonds with others. When deployment occurs, the attachment bond becomes unstable which may

cause children to display behavioral changes and increased stress, which in turn, also increases the stress of the parents.

Parent-Child Relationships

Attachment is defined as the relationship and bond between parent and child; John Bowlby was the first to describe attachment as a "psychological connectedness" and an evolutionary process in which infants have an innate drive to form attachments with caregivers, (Bretherton, 1992). The attachment bond young children create with their parents can be significant to their development and for creating positive life outcomes. Maintaining a secure attachment with a young child during the deployment process can be difficult and worrisome for parents. Louie and Cromer (2014) suggested that to help minimize the adjustment period and stress of deployment, parents could implement child-focused preparation plans and use effective communication strategies to benefit and strengthen parent-child attachments during the deployment cycle.

For younger children, the pre-deployment stage may be the most stressful (DeVoe & Ross, 2012); however, with age-appropriate strategies to prepare their children, coping with deployment may be easier. In an observation of attachment styles at each stage of deployment, Louie and Cromer (2014) noted that attachment preparation in the pre-deployment phase helped with parent-child relationships during reintegration. Inadequately preparing the child for their parent's deployment may leave them upset, confused, or even lead them to incorrectly blame themselves for the sudden separation (Louie & Cromer, 2014). To support the importance of deployment preparation on parent-child attachment, Julian et al., (2018) maintains that attachment relationships with their parents play a crucial role in a child's development and that it may be challenging for young children to reconnect with their parent when they reintegrate back

into the home after deployment, especially if there was little preparation in pre-deployment and communication during deployment.

Young children may not fully understand the process of deployment, but most are aware of the changes taking place in their environment. Parents may find it difficult to explain deployment in a developmentally appropriate way, making it harder for young children to understand why their parent is suddenly missing. Attachment bonds may become strained or insecure when parental figures (both deployed or at home) become unavailable or unresponsive (Lowe et al., 2012). However, the majority of parents who reported preparing their children for the deployment had significantly lower levels of parenting stress during reintegration (Louie & Cromer, 2014) and those that have secure attachments to their parents exhibited better behaviors during the deployment cycle (Posada et al., 2015). Despite preparations, young children may still face attachment issues because of prolonged separations denying both the deployed parent and the child the experience of sharing developmental milestones (Maholmes, 2012).

While a mother's attachment to a child is significantly important and more frequently researched, a father is typically the deployed parent within the military family context; therefore, understanding the attachment between the father and child can also be important. Although both parents' relationships may be observed and found within the literature, there is a lack of research supporting a holistic view of family relationships within a deployment context. Posada et al., (2015) noted that children whose fathers are more involved in their care display several positive outcomes, including fewer behavioral changes and greater sociability. Understanding the connection between the father and child's attachment can better help the preparation process. When preparing a child for their parent's deployment, it is important to recognize that their access to their caregiver(s) will feel threatened. Fostering the parent-child relationship via

increased communication during deployment can help maintain the attachment relationship with the deployed parent; Louie and Cromer (2014) support increasing communication through phone calls, skype, or letters.

Parental Stress and Attachment

Parental stress during the deployment cycle may add to attachment style changes in children because it is an important predictor of child psychological functioning (Maholmes, 2012). Lester et al., (2010) revealed that the parent who is the at-home caretaker during the time of deployment has elevated symptoms of distress, anxiety, and depression which strongly predicted internalizing and externalizing symptoms in children. The parent whose spouse has deployed may have a harder time dealing with stress and emotions which can have adverse consequences for a young child's attachment to both of their parents. In a study of mother-child attachment following the father's deployment, Tupper et al., (2018) discovered that maternal depressive symptoms and parenting stress can negatively affect a mother's ability to respond appropriately to a child's attachment needs and may directly be related to insecure attachments during and following deployment.

Children, whose parents are more stressed or experiencing posttraumatic stress returning from deployment, are at a greater risk for developing insecure attachment (Tupper et al., 2018) and increased distress during reintegration (DeVoe et al., 2018). The length of deployment may cause additional stress on the at-home parent whose role as a single-parent is increasing. Lowe et al., (2012) focused on family relationships in a study on deployment and noted that the attachments between the dependent military spouse and child are negatively impacted by greater length of deployment. There is a gap in the research supporting the military family as a unit and the impact of that the length of deployment has on the family unit. Posada et al., (2015) also

found that the prolonged period of deployment can indirectly challenge children's attachment relationship by producing stressful demands on the at-home parents and influencing the quality of care they provide.

Parental stress can increase for the at-home parent because they feel a lack of support and an increase in roles, as well as increased anxiety about their spouses' safety. At-home parents have reported feelings of isolation and lack of social support, as well as increased tiredness and difficulty caring for themselves and their children (Strong & Lee, 2017). On the other hand, social support acts as a buffer against the damaging effects of parental depressive symptoms and parenting stress (Tupper et al., 2018), with children rating their own and their family's functioning as higher when their parents have strong community connections (O'Neal, Mallette,et al., 2018). Children may experience a lack of structure during deployment due to the increased stress of a single-parent household. At-home spouses are under a great deal of stress and manage greater family and household responsibilities at a time when they are less equipped to do so (Strong & Lee, 2017). Thus, many parents report difficulty managing the emotions and behavioral changes of their children.

Parents need time away from their children to rejuvenate themselves and practice self-care. Clever and Segal (2013) confirmed that the well-being of the at-home parent and the child's well-being are strongly correlated. When their partner deploys and they take on the role of a single parent household, it can be much harder to find time for themselves, increasing their stress. Parents and program providers reported a need for affordable, trustworthy child-care (Strong & Lee, 2017), with better child-care options, at-home parents would have a better opportunity for self-care. Schools situated in communities where military families are heavily located, especially at on-base locations, are better prepared to recognize and respond to the needs

of military children (Pfefferbaum et al., 2011) and the availability of military sponsored programming may have positive impacts on the psychosocial wellbeing of children impacted by deployment stress (Richardson et al., 2016). McGuire et al., (2016) agreed that a consistent finding is that the health of the at-home parent is the most important predictor of child psychosocial functioning.

Child Behavior Changes during Deployment

Young children presenting insecure attachment behaviors during the deployment cycle typically show signs of changed behavior. Maholmes (2012) found that anxiety, needing more attention, and clinginess at reunion were found in children with insecure attachment towards their deployed parent. Children of military service members facing deployment are at risk for internalizing and externalizing conditions, attention and behavior problems, somatic complaints, and academic difficulties (Lester et al., 2010). At-home parents interviewed by Strong and Lee (2017) said some of the behavioral changes their children had were bedwetting, hitting, running away, nightmares, tantrums, anxiety, difficulty listening, and defiance.

Young children may experience behavioral issues in waves, based on which phase of the deployment cycle their family is in. During their interviews, Strong and Lee (2017) noted several parents saying that their children mirrored their emotions, therefore, if the parent is under stress and behaving differently, then their child may engage in those same negative behaviors. Deployment preparation, such as family discussions or increased one-on-one time before deployment, may help children cope with their parent who is deploying, which may decrease the likelihood of negative behavioral changes. Pfefferbaum et al., (2011) found that children's behavior and negative emotions worsened during deployment, specifically child-reported school problems and hyperactivity, and recovered in post-deployment and reintegration. Lester et al.,

(2010) found that in school-aged children, gender differences in behaviors may arise depending on the stage of deployment. Girls may show externalizing behaviors during deployment that subside upon their parent's return; whereas, boys may have a difficult time adjusting to their parent's return and increase in structure.

It has also been supported that the number and length of deployments the parents experience increases the risk of the child's behavioral issues. Barker and Berry (2009) found that as the number of times a parent deployed increased; their children showed a corresponding increase in behavioral changes. Home discipline problems, sadness, and increased demands for attention may be present in as many as 25-50% of children younger than 5 with a deployed parent (Barker and Berry 2009). Other behavioral issues may arise for children during deployment, including changes in appetite, changes in sleep patterns or nightmares, and increased clinginess (Barker & Berry, 2009).

Current Study

Since 2001, the war on terrorism has increased the number and durations of deployments service members are facing. More than 2 million troops have been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan since 2001, with the majority of troops facing their second or third deployment (Walsh et al., 2014). The purpose of the current study is to explore the deployment experiences of military families with young children or adolescents and the effects of deployment on the attachment relationship between the parents and children. There is a gap within the literature focusing on a family-centered understanding of the deployment cycle. This qualitative study aims to understand the effects of deployment within the family system. The specific aim is to (a) document challenges families face during the deployment cycle, (b) recognize changes that may

have occurred in the child's behavior throughout the deployment cycle, and (c) explore changes in the parent-child relationship during each phase of deployment.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

Recruitment and Participants

A convenience sample of 12 military family members was gathered using a snowball sample through Facebook posts inquiring about military families. A snowball sample was used to increase the number and variety of participants in the study. The sample criteria required families to have had at least one active-duty parent (including dual-military parents or stepparents), have experienced at least one military deployment, and have at least one child or adolescent, ranging in age from infancy to 18 years-old, in the family at the time of the deployment. Either the at-home parent or service member was allowed to participate in the survey based on availability. Twelve participants' answers were recorded within the survey; two of which did not meet the qualifying survey criteria, resulting in N=10. Demographic information and military characteristics for the remaining ten qualifying participants can be found in Table 1. None of the participants were currently dual military families, thus, the deployed service member is referred to as the "deployed parent" (DP) and the non-service member parent, who cared for the children during the deployment, is referred to as the "at-home parent" (AHP).

Table 1
Participant Characteristics (N = 10)

Participant Demographics	***N* (%)**	**Range *(M)***
Race		
White/Caucasian	9 (90%)	
Hispanic/Latino	1(10%)	
Gender		
Female	10 (100%)	
Age		24-49 (35)
Educational Attainment		
High school or equivalent	1 (10%)	
Associate degree (2 years college)	2 (20%)	
Bachelor's degree (4 years college)	5 (50%)	
Master's degree	1 (10%)	
Doctoral degree	1 (10%)	

Relationship Status		
Married	10 (100%)	
Employment Status		
Stay-at-home Mom	2 (20%)	
Self-Employed	1 (10%)	
Full-Time	7 (70%)	
Military Characteristics		
Military Employment		
Active Duty Spouses	8 (80%)	
Retired Veteran AHP	2 (20%)	
Living Arrangements		
Off Base	10 (100%)	
Permanent Changes in Station (PCS)		0 – 7 (3.13)
None	2 (20%)	
One	3 (30%)	
Two-Four	2 (20%)	
Five or More	3 (30%)	
Number of Familial Deployments		1 – 10 (3.36)
One-Four	10 (83%)	
Five or More	2 (17%)	
Length of Longest Deployment (months)		4 – 15 (10.8)

Demographic Information

The participants of this study were all at-home parents, with their partners being the deployed parent. Out of the 10 participants, 2 had previously been active duty themselves, in addition to their partner being a service member. All participants were female, currently married, and ranged in age from 24-49 (M = 35). Nine participants were white, and one was Hispanic/Latino. Eight of the participants (80%) were at-home parents, while two were veterans and current at-home parents (20%). The ten qualifying participants had a total of 28 children, with an average of 2.8 children per family; there were a total of 21 children under the age of 18 living in the home. All participants had obtained an education of a high school diploma or higher.

Military Characteristics

Most participants reported that their partner was currently active duty (80%), while the remaining partners were retired from active duty (20%). While most participants did not specify their affiliated military branch, one described that her partner was a Department of State (DoS) contractor and another specified that her partner was in the U.S. Army Reserve. All participants were currently living off base. The majority (80%) had experienced a permanent change in station (PCS), and half had experienced multiple PCS orders (M = 3.13). All participants had experienced at least one military deployment or mobilization of their partner, and the two veterans also had prior deployments themselves. Total number of familial deployments ranged from 1 – 10 (M = 3.36) and the length of longest reported deployments ranged from 4 – 15 months (M = 10.8 months). Reported deployment locations included Afghanistan, Qatar, Bagram, and Korea.

Procedure

A qualitative design was used in this study due to its ability to capture a more in-depth and comprehensive depiction of the effect of military deployment on spouses and children (Strong & Lee, 2017). After approval from the University Institutional Review Board, open-ended surveys were created using Qualtrics and distributed using Facebook posts on personal pages, as well as Facebook groups including mom groups and military family groups. The surveys were formatted for participants to answer survey questions in an unrestricted manner; they were able to self-report their responses by typing in answers on the survey link. All participation was voluntary, and each participant was given informed consent prior to beginning the survey. Each survey took between 30 to 45 minutes, depending on the participants' depth of answering. The surveys are being stored upon permission of the participant. The data were collected anonymously from the surveys for participant privacy and are being saved on

OneDrive for up to three years following the study to allow time for transcription. The anonymized data have only been shared between the necessary coders and the faculty advisor and have been kept confidential between those three.

Open-Ended Surveys

An open-ended survey was created via Qualtrics Survey Software and used survey questions from an established military family study (See Appendix A for a complete list of survey questions). Open-ended survey questions allow participants to answer survey questions in their own words with as much detail as they feel like giving. Open-ended questions offer a way of providing qualitative depth in survey-based research (Mossholder et al., 1995). By using established survey questions, this study ensured the validity and the reliability of the study.

Coding and Thematic Analysis

Coding is the process of identifying pieces of meaning in the data and labeling them with a code which represents the theme (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Coding will make the data more retrievable, transparent, and structured (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). This study used both inductive and deductive coding. Inductive coding allows for codes to be developed directly from the phrases or terms used by the participants (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Inductive coding allows the researcher to remain open-minded and focused on the information found in the data rather than the ideas and prior understandings of the researcher. Deductive coding helps focus the coding on the issues that are known to be important from the literature findings (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019). Deductive coding was also used because the study uses theoretical frameworks to support the literature which may be converted into a coding framework.

Thematic analysis was used to systematically identify and organize patterns within the data. By using thematic analysis, the coders were able to focus on the patterns found within the data and make sense of the collective or shared themes (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The purpose of thematic analysis is to become familiar with the data from the transcribed text and identify the relevant answers to a particular research questions rather than random patterns that could be found across any data set (Braun & Clarke, 2012). After reviewing the data, the coders searched for and named the themes related to the research questions. Two coders reviewed the themes to determine how they best represent the data set. Once the themes were finalized, they were defined and named to capture the principle of the theme (Braun & Clarke, 2012).

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of this study, measures were taken to address the validity and reliability. Internal validity is the extent of which the study measures or tests what is intended or how accurate the data is in representing the variable they are intended to (Shenton, 2004). The survey questions were asked with the research questions and literature in mind to ensure that the study measured what was intended. Reliability focuses on the consistency across time (test-retest) and researchers (inter-rater); if the study were repeated, using the same methods and participants, and the same results were obtained, the study would be highly reliable (Shenton, 2004). This study employed inter-rater reliability to ensure the trustworthiness of the study by using two coders to code the data; this tested for the consistency within the coding and thematic analysis process. A 50% consensus rate between coders ensured the agreement and consistency of codes within the study. Consensus, or intercoder agreement, acts as a "reality check" (Saldana, 2009, p. 27) among coders in a research study and the range with which the coders agree acts as a means of consistency for the coders and reliability within the study.

Throughout the study, the research team used memos to record thoughts and ideas about the codes and relationships found within the data. Memos allowed the research team to engage with the data and draw a deeper meaning from it (Birks et al., 2008). Memoing assists researchers in making conceptual jumps from the data to the themes that explain the research phenomena (Birks et al., 2008). Memos can help researchers from the conception of a study and throughout the research process by acting as a way for researchers to keep track of their thoughts. An important benefit of memoing within research is that it initiates and maintains productivity throughout the entirety of the study (Birks et al., 2008). Throughout the study, the researcher consulted and debriefed with the faculty investigator.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Themes

Military family members, including active duty and retired service members and at-home parents, expressed their feelings and individual experiences with military deployment and the effects of the absence of a spouse and parent. While coding the data, several themes were created based on internal family experiences and external events and experiences. Five internal themes were coded from the data and include: (1) Parental Stress, (2) Changes in Routine, (3) Loss of Support, (4) Child's Adjustment, and (5) Family Resilience. Two themes based on external events and experiences include: (1) COVID-19 Pandemic and (2) Time. Themes are described below with example participant quotes for each.

Parental Stress

Going through the deployment cycle can have many different emotional impacts, including increased stressors, hardships, and loneliness. A common concern amongst the participants was the increased stress and hardships that deployment caused for families, especially for the at-home parents. When asked what their family's most recent deployment was like, five respondents agreed that the deployment incredibly stressful for their family and many agreed that it was extremely hard on their family. One participant described it as "very stressful" and explained that she was "just so exhausted by the end of the week," while another said "they [military spouse] lose time with their family and miss milestones within their family." One at-home parent said that the long years of service and deployments caused her and her partner to divorce due to, "as the years went on we drifted apart as I found I was tired of being a single parent." One at-home parent (AHP) also described the experience for the deployed parent (DP)

as, “tough for him, especially because I was pregnant, and he missed out on a summer with our son.”

Changes in Routine

The temporary loss of the deployed partner/parent effects the entire family’s lives, causing inevitable changes and disruptions within daily routines. New routines and head of households are created which can add to the stress of the children and at-home parents, as well as the deployed parent during their eventual return. One at-home parent described the change in routine as, “there was always what life was when he was deployed and what life was like when he was home.” In addition to the role changes, families face changes in communicating with their loved ones while they are deployed, based on time zone differences. One participant said that their child had a hard time “adjusting to the time differences between Afghanistan and the East Coast, USA.” When reporting on their partner’s deployment, one at-home parent said, “[there are] very different routines and responsibilities, even what and how we ate changed.”

While many presume the deployment phase of the cycle to have the most changes in routine, military families face changes in routine when the deployed parent returns or reintegrates back into the home. One AHP said, [the return home] was difficult with him taking over bills and change in routine.” Another reported that during reintegrating, there was a period of “establishing head of household,” and “readjusting to having help, we had a routine down and he wasn’t in it.” During the reintegration phase, several AHPs said “it takes time and patience” and “a few days before things were back to normal.”

Loss of Support

During a military deployment, families are expected to face losing a loved one, partner, and/or parent both temporarily and possibly indefinitely; this loss comes with increased stressors

and changes in family dynamics. This study's participants felt a loss of support from their partner, their family, and even financially. A mother of two reported, "our children miss their dad and I miss my partner – my support." One participant described the lack of support from her partner combined with a lack of family nearby as particularly difficult for her mental health: "There were a few times I really thought I was going to lose my mind." A mother of four said that having her partner away from the family was hard and stressful: "You never knew when you would speak to your spouse again." During the deployment cycle, communicating can become more difficult for spouses and family members, furthering increasing their feelings of losing their support systems. An at-home parent reported that she and her partner, "struggled with communication with one another, which put a strain on our marriage." When it came to the loss of finances, one participant said, "it was hard financially because my husband was spending money where he was and not thinking about expenses back home.

Child Adjustment

The deployment cycle can be an especially difficult time for children, especially young children who do not fully grasp the concept of time and the meaning of deployment. Many at-home parents reported that throughout the deployment, their children missed their dad. One parent quoted both her children as saying, "I miss daddy," frequently and another parent said, "our daughter was worried about her dad and she said it was like missing a piece of her heart." A mother of two young children said, "it's really difficult when the kids have a bad day and all they want is daddy." Children not only miss their deployed parent but can also detect changes in their relationship with their at-home parent. One AHP reported that their children would say, "mom didn't have time to play anymore when he [dad/deployed parent] was gone."

Younger children may have a harder time remembering who their dad is and where he has gone during deployment, especially if they have not had a chance to form a strong attachment bond prior to deployment. When asked what a challenge was when the deployed parent returned home, one mother stated that, “the biggest challenge was having my son not really know his dad when he got back. He was so young when he deployed.” During the reintegration period, one mom said, “he [her spouse] didn’t take it personally when our three-year-old didn’t want Daddy to do things like put him to bed (only lasted a few days before things were back to normal).”

For some children, a deploying military parent can create fear; one at-home parent reported that upon her partner’s return, their children “feared that he would leave again.” An at-home parent told a story of when her spouse returned home and how their youngest child “snuck into our room after we went to sleep and laid her head on my husband and feet on me. She wanted to make sure we both stayed.” A mother of two reported her three-year-old son as saying, “Daddy going to Army,” and “Daddy always comes back.” Another issue mother reported their children having was their children “not understanding why their dad was gone for so long.”

Family Resilience

Although military deployments pose several risk factors for children and families, a sense of resiliency can arise from facing a deployment cycle together as a family. Military families have a strong ability to adapt and overcome obstacles due to their resiliency. When asked if deployment has changed their family for better or worse, many AHPs reported that deployments have made their family better. One mother of two said that, “deployments make our family stronger,” and another mother said, “made us happier to be together, we appreciate each other more.” Upon reintegrating back into the home, many families spend more time together and have

more time to "re-bond." One AHP described one positive from her partner's return as, "we had a wonderful time, actually having time to do fun things as a family. Military families become increasingly appreciative of family and time together after experiencing deployment. One at-home parent stated that, "we don't take time or friends/family for granted," and another said, "you appreciate having the family together more after deployment."

COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has created a time of uncertainty and increased stress for everyone; however, it has had an increased effect on military families facing a deployment. Several participants reported facing their spouses' deployment and a pregnancy during the pandemic which has made things more difficult for their family. "Having the increased uncertainty of facing the pandemic, along with a pregnancy during deployment," was one of the participants first thoughts when thinking of their partner's most recent deployment. Another participant reported that their "children didn't understand why their dad was gone for so long and the deployment being during a pandemic made it a lot harder on all of us."

Time

Time is one of the largest external experiences that families face when going through a deployment cycle. In general, deployments may last from 90 days to 15 months (Louie and Cromer, 2014), and the average deployment among the current sample was almost 11 months. This is an incredible length of time for spouses to face without their partner and support system and even more so for children to be separated from their parent. Fifty percent of the participants agreed that [the deployment cycle] was a long period of time and that, "they [deployed parent] lose time with their family, miss milestones and other things [within their family]." Having

young children during a lengthy deployment can be difficult because as one AHP reported, “the children didn’t understand why their dad was gone for so long.”

In addition to the length of deployment, time changes when a household of two parents suddenly becomes one. An at-home parent reported that having her partner gone was stressful because of how much responsibility she had (taking children to school, going to work, making dinner, homework, housework, etc.) and how little time there was to fit everything in. She expressed, “We didn’t do a lot on the weekends...because I was just so exhausted by the end of the week.”

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Typical families and individuals face daily stressors and challenges, however adding a military deployment to the equation can increase the obstacles and daily hardships that families and individuals encounter. The current study utilized a qualitative design to obtain firsthand knowledge from military families about their experiences throughout the deployment cycle. The study focuses on how deployment impacts families' lives and how these impacts effects individual members of the family, specifically the stress levels of the at-home parents and the attachment bonds of the children within the family to their parents. This particular sample had unique set of stressful circumstances and individual hardships, including lengthy deployments, multiple deployments, and deploying during a pandemic. Almost all of the families in this sample have experienced PCS orders, with one family having seven, which can add to the stressful transitions and challenges these families have faced in addition to deployment.

Themes

Throughout the coding process, several themes occurred throughout the data. Those consisted of internal forces within the family, including parental stress; changes in routine; loss of support, child adjustment and family resilience; and external forces such as the COVID-19 pandemic and time. Past literature indicates that the internal forces found within the current study's data are typical for families facing deployment. Time is also a common theme within military family research. However, a new finding within this study is the effects that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on families who are also facing a deployment.

When a service member deploys, the at-home parent suddenly takes on the role of both head of household and single parent. Many at-home parents' stress levels increase with the newfound family and household responsibilities (Strong & Lee, 2017); their stress may also be

attributed to the length of deployment due to the increased time within the single parent role (Lowe et al., 2012). The current study found that many AHPs had increased stress levels while taking on the role of head of household and having a lack of partner support. Participants reported being more exhausted mentally and physically, while their children found that their at-home parent had less time to play while their deployed parent was gone.

Children of military families may have a particularly hard time adjusting to the time away from their deployed parent and the loss of full emotional support from their at-home parent. This study had several reports from mothers stating that their child missed their daddy while they were deployed. Others reported that during reintegration, their child "didn't know who their dad was." Julian et al., (2018) maintains that it may be challenging for young children to reconnect with their parent when they reintegrate back into the home after deployment. The findings in this study add to the existing literature and support the concern that children have a difficult time adjusting to all parts of the deployment cycle.

Although deployments increase stress levels for families, it can bolster familial relationships and create more positive outlooks for individuals. Reintegration can be a time of excitement and reunion for many families (DeVoe & Ross, 2012) and serve to either strengthen or weaken family ties and family system functioning (O'Neal, Lucier-Greer, et al., 2018). The current study presents that many military families facing deployment have a better appreciation on life and family. One family reported that, "we [their family] don't take time or friends/family for granted," and another agreed, "deployments make our family stronger." The deployment cycle can increase families' resiliency and ability to adapt to their ever-changing situations.

While the COVID-19 pandemic was not the focal point of the current study, it offered new and valuable data that future research could expand upon. The pandemic has affected

everyone across the world and has taken its toll, in many forms, upon the nation. Adults have been forced to work at home, children removed from school settings, and families pushed together and torn apart all at once. This pandemic has increased stress and fatigue for everyone (Horesh & Brown, 2020), including those in military families. Two participants reported that they faced a military deployment, pregnancy, and the pandemic all at once making things that much more difficult. The pandemic provided more uncertainty with childcare, deployment experiences, and overall life experiences.

Theoretical Perspectives

The implications of this study support frameworks from both the family systems and attachment theories. The family systems theory supports that communication (Smith & Hamon, 2017) and predictable patterns (Thompson et al., 2017) improve family function and well-being. This study found that participants said lack of communication put a strain on their marital relationship and that communication was an important factor to getting life back on track post-deployment. The family systems theory focuses on the relationships and interactions between family members (Smith & Hamon, 2017); this study supports that the family is in a homeostatic state when they are united, however, during deployment the balance is disrupted causing stress and changes in daily functions. Family systems require homeostatic functioning from each individual to produce the best outcomes for the family (Snyder et al., 2016). Throughout the deployment cycle, the deployed parent is a missing piece from the family system, thus disrupting the family's function and well-being. One parent commented on the increased family responsibility and how exhausting it was. The changes in routine and added stress to the at-home parent, reported in this study, effect the family's function, and call for adjustments in their balance and routines.

The attachment theory emphasizes the significance of the bonds between parents and young children (Bowlby, 1978). Research supports the challenges that deployment creates for families with young children and their attachment relationships. In this study, many at-home parents' fears were for their children missing their father (deployed parent) and not understanding why they are gone for a long period of time. A major theme within this study was that of child adjustment. Participants reported their children being afraid, feeling as if their mom (AHP) had less time to play with them, and not knowing who their father was when he returned. These finding align with previous research that supports the attachment theory and the concept that deployment can directly affect attachment relationships between the deployed parents and child by separating them for long periods of time (Posada et al., 2015).

Limitations

Limitations must be considered within the implications of the study's findings. The nature of the qualitative research design allowed for the findings to be more personal and explorative, however it limited the generalizability of the findings and the snowball sampling method proved to be more difficult to gain participants. In addition to the qualitative methodology, the open-ended survey design further limited the study by allowing participants to answer as freely as they chose, which led to shorter, surface level answers. One of the major limitations of this study includes gathering data during the COVID-19 pandemic, which made data collection more difficult because of the added stress and time constraints on families, as well as the inability to meet in person to gather richer responses. The size and diversity of this sample contributed a great limitation to this study and the generalizability of its findings. The small sample size did not allow for saturation amongst the themes within the data. While the coders coded for similar ideas and phrases, there was a difference in the number of codes

amongst coders, which led to a smaller consensus rate, adding to the limitations of the study. An additional limitation to this study was the lack of incentives.

Implications and Future Directions

This study builds off existing literature and uses a theoretical framework to increase the understanding of families facing a military deployment. The findings of this study support that military deployments take a toll on family relationships and attachment bonds, as well as increase roles and stress for the at-home parents. However, parents also reported certain helpful coping strategies and resilience stemming from deployment. Future research may benefit from focusing on the identified themes to pull more information from a larger sample size of military and at-home parents. Gathering larger quantitative samples could provide more information about the repercussions that military deployment has on child attachment bonds. Also, although the COVID-19 pandemic created limitations within data collection, it provided an unanticipated but important theme within the findings of the study. This aspect could be more intentionally examined to determine the impact it has had and continues to have on military families facing deployment.

In addition to implications for research, this study also provides practical implications for military families, practitioners, and therapists working with military families. The findings may benefit professionals working with military families by providing a deeper understanding of families' needs during each stage of deployment. As one participant stated, "no one thinks being away from their family is an easy task," but family members may be better prepared if they know what to expect. The findings support the need for more family-oriented trainings. For example, participants reported the importance of certain key family functions, such as communication and routine. These can be encouraged, and families can be taught to practice and implement these in

the home. Practitioners may be able to provide better programs and resources to families facing a military deployment and for those reintegrating back into the home and potentially back into civilian life. As an example, the parents may not be expecting the changes in routine, both during and after a deployment. One parent explained that they "never received much reintegration information." Preparation for reintegration could include knowledge about the necessary readjustments to the routine, planning for household division of labor, and helping the military parent rebuild bonds with their partner and child(ren) and the importance of the attachment process for children during reintegration. Also, family therapy focused on establishing and building healthy family relational skills may enable parents to learn, practice, and develop plans for success in times of transition or stress.

Overall, the findings of this study support prior research regarding the effects of military deployments within a family and confirm that military deployments are difficult and stressful transitions that may have a negative impact on the family's well-being and children's attachment. Thus, practical strategies such as preparation, providing information and support, as well as teaching communication and coping skills, could benefit the whole family during and after a military deployment.

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APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL

EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board
4N-64 Brody Medical Sciences Building· Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284** · **rede.ecu.edu/umcirb/**

Notification of Exempt Certification

From: Social/Behavioral IRB
To: Shelby Lewis
CC: Jacquelyn Mallette
Date: 2/8/2021
Re: UMCIRB 20-003000
An Exploration of Parental Stress and Child Attachment during a Military Deployment

I am pleased to inform you that your research submission has been certified as exempt on 2/7/2021. This study is eligible for Exempt Certification under category # 2ab.

It is your responsibility to ensure that this research is conducted in the manner reported in your application and/or protocol, as well as being consistent with the ethical principles of the Belmont Report and your profession.

This research study does not require any additional interaction with the UMCIRB unless there are proposed changes to this study. Any change, prior to implementing that change, must be submitted to the UMCIRB for review and approval. The UMCIRB will determine if the change impacts the eligibility of the research for exempt status. If more substantive review is required, you will be notified within five business days.

Document	Description
An Exploration of Parental Stress and Child Attachment during a Military Deployment(0.02)	Study Protocol or Grant Application
Research Study Recruitment Script.pdf(0.01)	Recruitment Documents/Scripts
Survey Consent Paragraph for Exempt Research .doc(0.01)	Consent Forms
Survey Questions.docx(0.01)	Surveys and Questionnaires

For research studies where a waiver or alteration of HIPAA Authorization has been approved, the IRB states that each of the waiver criteria in 45 CFR 164.512(i)(1)(i)(A) and (2)(i) through (v) have been met. Additionally, the elements of PHI to be collected as described in items 1 and 2 of the Application for Waiver of Authorization have been determined to be the minimal necessary for the specified research.

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

APPENDIX B: SURVEY QUESTIONS

Military Family Demographics

1. How old are you?
2. What gender do you identify with?
3. What is your race?
4. How would you describe your current relationship status?
5. What is your level of education?
6. How would you describe your employment status?
7. What is your role within your family (ex., at-home parent, military service member)?
8. List all your children, their gender, ages, and their relationship to you (ex., Maria, girl, 9 years old, stepdaughter)
9. Which of your children live with you? Which children live somewhere else?
10. Do you live on or off base? Where is your base located?
11. How long have you been at your current station?
12. Has your family experienced any Permanent Change of Stations? {If yes} How many?
13. How many times have [you/your partner] been deployed?
14. What is the longest deployment [you/your partner] has experienced?
15. In total, counting all deployments, about how many months would you say [you/your partner] has spent deployed?

Deployment Experiences

1. Thinking about your most recent deployment, where were [you/your partner] deployed and for how long? How long has it been since [you/they] returned home?
2. What is the first thing that comes to mind about your experience with [your/your partner's] most recent deployment?
3. What was it like for [you/your partner] to be away from your family and life back home during the most recent deployment?

Reintegration Experiences

1. Please identify any challenges or positives that have occurred since [you/your partner] returned home. What has been difficult? What has been positive?
2. What stands out for [you/your partner] about the reintegration experience?
3. If [you/your partner] had any challenges during reintegration, what caused them?
4. Did [you/your] partner do anything to make the reintegration experience easier for you and your family? What did [you/your partner] do?

Attachment Experiences

1. Please share any comments related to deployment or reunion made by your child.
2. What did your child find hard about adapting to his/her parent's deployment? What did your child find hard about adapting to his/her parent's return?
3. Has deployment changed your family for the better or worse?