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The Long-Term Effects of Parental Military Deployment on Perceived Parent/Child Relationship Quality

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There remains a paucity of research surrounding the potential long-term effects of parental military deployment. This article provides counselors with an ability to better understand the long-term implications of parental deployment on the parent/child relationship through qualitative interviews with the, now, young adults who experienced a parent's deployment, using consensual qualitative research methodology. The study makes several contributions to the knowledge base. Utilizing Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, this study examined how adult children of deployed parents view their past and current parental relationships. Four domains emerged, including 1) factors impacting relationship with dad, 2) deployment cycle, 3) military culture, and 4) changes in perspective. Implications for both research and clinical work stem from the study's results, including a proposed ecological developmental framework.

Keywords: military, deployment, children, parents, development

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Since September 11, 2001, more than 2.7 million American service members have deployed to support military operations in Afghanistan/Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), and Iraq/Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) (Watson.brown.edu, 2014). The impact of deployments on service members are well documented. Significant rates of various conditions such as major depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), substance abuse/dependence, various psychiatric diagnoses, and increased rates of suicide are prominent (Bøg et al., 2018). Three million individuals are family members of service members, of which approximately one and a half million are children (Department of Defense, 2016).

In addition to the impact on the service members, the costs to their families vary. Families of deployed service members face understandable concern surrounding their loved one's safety (Duckworth, 2009). Many military families face financial difficulty, loss of a caregiver, and loss of emotional support (Lester et al., 2010). Though some of these problems resolve upon return from deployment, new difficulties may emerge. Given the population of military families, understanding their experiences, specifically the one million children whose parents had deployed as of 2012, warrants further understanding.

Parental Deployment

Extant research indicates children who experience parental deployment face adverse consequences (RAND Corporation, 2011). One area of impact is psychological well-being (RAND Corporation, 2011; RAND Corporation, 2008). During parental deployments, children are significantly more likely to seek outpatient mental health services than children of non-deployed parents. Pediatric stress disorders increase 19% during parental deployment (Gorman et al., 2011). Adolescent males and females in 8th, 10th, and 12th grades with deployed parents reported higher rates of depressed mood than those with civilian parents or those with military parents who were not deployed (Reed et al., 2011). Children experiencing parental deployment or going through the post-deployment reintegration process are more likely to engage in alcohol consumption, marijuana use, or the use of other illicit drugs (Acion et al., 2013).

Parental deployment can contribute to decreases in academic performance (RAND, 2011) and problematic school behaviors (Chandra et al., 2009). Reed et al., (2011), using a sample of 8th, 10th, and 12th grade adolescents, found those with military parents were more likely to earn a majority of Cs, Ds, and Fs. RAND Corporation (2011) reported significant results for military youth compared to civilians, indicating this population felt less connected to peers and less happy at school.

Stress increases for the at-home caregiver and can lead to tragic outcomes. Rentz et al. (2007) reported that between January 1, 2000 and September 30, 2002, substantiated child maltreatment was 37 percent lower among military families than civilians. However, from October 1, 2002, to June 30, 2003, substantiated child maltreatment cases were 22 percent higher in military families than civilians. McCarthy et al. (2015) reported child maltreatment committed by the civilian parent was 52% higher during deployment compared to pre-deployment.

Post-deployment reintegration may prove difficult for families, as children and parents engage in role renegotiation as the deployed parent resumes responsibilities children assumed during deployments (Lester et al., 2010). RAND Corporation (2011) revealed nearly 60% of youth reported challenges during parental reintegration. These problems include nearly 50% of children concerned for future deployments, 40% of children dealing with the formerly deployed parent's mood, 30% reporting problems related to establishing a relationship with their deployed parent, and 28% reporting difficulty deciding which parent to turn to for advice.

Fathers returning from deployment also endorsed difficulty readjusting to the role of parent. Dayton et al. (2014) completed a qualitative study illustrating parents' perceived shifts within the family. Walsh et al. (2014) expanded upon this via a grounded theory study emphasizing fathers' perceived relationship problems with their children following deployment. In 2001, 15% of officers gave familial separation as the primary reason for separating from the military. By 2004, this number doubled to 30%. For enlisted service members, this number increased from 11% to 18% in the same time frame (U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences, 2006).

The studies and statistics reported above demonstrate parental perceptions regarding difficulties stemming from deployment. However, little is known about the perceptions of the child regarding deployments, nor how those perceptions continue to impact the child as they grow into adulthood. A deeper understanding would aid military aid organizations, educators, and psychologists in attending to the unique needs of this population.

Ecological Systems Theory

Evidence indicates children's experiences of deployment impact numerous facets of life. Thus, Ecological Systems Theory is an appropriate lens to better understand this population (EST; Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner describes development as an evolving interaction over the course of a life among the people and settings where one lives. These people and settings impact one another, and their interactions merit understanding. Development is the outcome of the phenomenon at a point in time, rather than the phenomenon itself (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Bronfenbrenner proposed four initial systems presented in a nested arrangement: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), and later, the chronosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1986).

The *microsystem* plays a critical role for this population. Literature regarding impacts of parental deployment focuses on shifts in the microsystem, specifically changes within the family, school behavior, and academic performance (Flake et al., 2009; Chandra et al., 2010). Though numerous studies provide prevalence rates of problems, no studies utilized a qualitative approach to understand this population.

The second layer is the *mesosystem*, or interactions among microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994). The mesosystem may entail how interactions among school and family generate new phenomena. Reed et al. (2011) noted students experiencing parental deployment are 10% more likely to receive grades below a B. Richardson et al. (2011) reported at-home caregivers are less likely to attend school meetings and assist with homework thus exacerbating changes between the two microsystems.

The third layer is the *exosystem*, which refers to various external

settings. Bronfenbrenner (1979) noted a parent's place of work (such as the military) and a parent's network of friends are exosystems that often impact an individual's development. Huebner et al. (2007) posited loss and uncertainty are recurrent themes for children in military families.

Ambiguity regarding a parent's deployment is a result of a parent's career.

The *macrosystem* refers to the interactions of lower level systems (micro-, meso-, exo-). Specifically, the macrosystem examines prevalent traits within the inner three systems (Bronfenbrenner 1979; 1994). It is important to note military culture and values (macrosystem) seep into the microsystem of the family. Military mores may impact the reintegration of the service member and impact the parent/child relationship later in life (Brown, 2012). With the reintegration process impacted by military values, it is pertinent to understand this population's perspective of reintegration and their relationship with their parent.

The *chronosystem* is the 5th and final system of EST. The chronosystem incorporates shifts over the course of one's life. These changes may be within the individual or broader economic or sociocultural trends (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Purpose of the Present Study

Though literature regarding parental deployment continues to grow, several questions warrant investigation. Sandoz et al. (2014) theorized children of deployed service members face difficulty adjusting to novel familial norms during reintegration. Long-term negative impacts, specifically externalized behavior, may be attributed to temporary parental separation (Murray & Farrington, 2005). Additionally, long-term impacts were found on the quality of relationships with parents and other family members following parental divorce (Ahrons, 2007). Huebner et al. (2007) revealed children who experienced parental deployment could identify relational shifts with formerly deployed parents. Additionally, 54% of participants endorsed reintegrating the formerly deployed parent as problematic (RAND Corporation, 2011).

To begin understanding the long-term effect of deployment on these relationships, a qualitative methodology was appropriate. Consensual

qualitative research (CQR) provided the best means to better understand this phenomenon (Hill et al., 1997).

Method

Participants

Ten young adults (19-25 years-old) participated in the study. Hill et al. (2005) recommends 8-15 participants. Participants were asked to identify their gender, resulting in 3 males and 7 females. Participants' ages during the deployment were gathered, with ages ranging from 2 to 18 years-old. Regarding ethnicity, 9 participants identified as Caucasian while 1 participant identified as Latino. All participants reported paternal deployments. None reported maternal deployments. The number of deployments experienced ranged from 2 to 7, and the length of individual deployments was 1 to 18 months. Participant demographics are summarized in Table 1.

Researchers

The CQR coding team consisted of 3 male doctoral research assistants (all non-Latino White, U.S.-born), 1 female doctoral research assistant (non-Latina, White, U.S.-born), and 1 female master's research assistant (non-Latina, White, U.S.-born). An external auditor (non-Latina, U.S.-born, faculty member with experience in CQR) contributed to the study.

Procedures

This study was conducted in accordance with standards put forth by an institutional review board. This ensured ethical procedures for recruitment, interviews, and data storage. Participants were recruited through a variety of mediums including various social media platforms and paper flyers distributed at two state university campuses located in Northern Plains states. Participants were compensated with a 10-dollar gift card to an online retailer. The first individual who met the criteria and agreed to participate, served as the subject of a pilot study.

The first author conducted interviews, lasting approximately 45 minutes. The interview consisted of five fixed questions, and follow-up prompts to ensure consistency across participants.

The primary interview questions were as follows:

1. What does it mean to you to grow up in a military family?
2. What was your relationship like with your parent prior to their deployment(s)?
3. What was your relationship like with your formerly deployed parent right after his or her return?
4. What is your relationship like with that parent now?
5. What, if any, impact does deployment have on a parent's relationship with their child?

Data Analysis

Team members reviewed and discussed seminal journal articles describing the process of CQR (Hill et al., 1997; Hill et al., 2005). To mitigate the impact of bias on the analysis, the team examined potential preconceptions prior to examining data. Two team members reported growing up in military households. Both also endorsed experiencing paternal deployment of not more than 4 months. Other group members later disclosed their own parental experiences and how they may impact their perceptions of the data.

The following military biases were discussed by the team: 1) hypermasculine norms in the military are common and thus, emotions may not be commonly discussed, 2) military culture is viewed as supportive, 3) Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom were handled poorly by government leadership, 4) parental deployment has some effect on the parent/child relationship into young adulthood, 5) the Air Force was regarded as less militaristic than other branches, and 6) a team member reported a negative view of the military power structure. The analysis team identified the following biases regarding parent/child relationships: 1) Paternal relationships entail fewer emotions than maternal relationships 2) Daughters would report closer relationships with fathers than sons.

Team members worked independently to read the transcripts and code the data. Members then returned to the team to address discrepancies

and ensure fidelity to the CQR model. Subsequently, each team member established initial inferences for themes. The research team then met to discuss the independently developed themes. During these interactions, the research team began to develop a consensus on domains and categories. The domains (comprised of multiple categories) were refined until consensus was reached. After the initial iteration, the auditor reviewed the results to mitigate any inference of bias. Feedback from the auditor was incorporated. After subsequent iterations and the emergence of additional categories, the research team engaged in a cross-analysis procedure to provide information on the prevalence of each category. For the purposes of this study, “general” indicates appearance in 9-10 cases, “typical” indicates appearance in 5-8 cases, and “variant” indicates appearance in 2-4 cases.

Team members utilized the derived categories to code transcripts during cross-analysis. The team met and addressed discrepancies. The domain “Factors Impacting Relationship with Dad” warranted attention as fleshing out nuances between categories proved arduous. Following this, cross-case analyses occurred, however no differences in categories or domains emerged.

Results

Research team members initially identified 77 separate themes. Through the iterative process inherent in CQR, these 77 initial themes were refined into 4 domains and fourteen categories. The cross-analysis assisted in confirming the domains and providing information on the frequency of each category (Table 2). The four domains were 1) factors impacting relationship with dad, 2) deployment cycle, 3) military culture, and 4) changes in perspective.

Factors Impacting Relationship with Dad

The first domain that emerged pertained to factors impacting participants’ paternal relationships. Following the first question, subsequent questions aimed to elicit information regarding the parent/child relationship. Questions were not structured in a way to elicit positive or

negative aspects of the parent/child relationship prior to, during, or following the deployment.

The domain of *Factors Impacting Relationship with Dad* consists of four categories. The categories are: (a) communication, (b) dad's personality, (c) dad's involvement with children, and (d) dad as a "friend."

Communication

Participants in this study typically (8 out of 10) reported communication with their father was a critical factor regarding their relationship. Participant 3 stated, "Our co-communication was very, very bad, and we just, you know, it was mostly just a lot of him getting mad about what he was hearing and so, it just wasn't a very comfortable environment during that time."

Dad's Personality

Participants typically (6 out of 10) indicated their father's personality impacted the quality of the relationship. Participant 2 noted the following relating to their father's personality, "Like the way in which discipline, etc. was done. Like, he was very conservative, very strict."

Participant 7 reported that his father's personality stood in contrast to their own means of connecting to others:

I mean, my dad was always very stern and straightforward kind of, military man. That's how I would describe him. Honestly, he, he tried real hard, is what I'll say about him. But he had a lot of difficulty emotionally connecting with people, and I'm a relatively sensitive individual, who I've been told I got that from my mother (laughs).

Participant 9 recalled a specific instance of their father's personality yielding conflict:

I remember one time I think I'd like lost my shoes in the living room somewhere and maybe I didn't put them up and he just kind of threw open my door and like tossed the shoes in there. It didn't even come close to hitting me or anything. It wasn't like he was throwing

the shoes at me, but for some reason that stuck out in my head, because it was just kind of like sudden. I was like in my bean bag chair and reading and he just kind of like threw the shoes in there. I think I said something like, "What the hell?" Or something like that and he was just really mad about the shoes. There would just be stuff like that, where ... Just stuff that you wouldn't think would irritate someone that much. He would just get really, really irritated by it.

Dad's Involvement with Children

Participants (10 out of 10) reported paternal involvement with them stood as a factor impacting the relationship. Participant 1 noted, "I was very into sports when I was growing up, and he would always be the one that would be out back with me and helping me, I guess, get better."

Participant 10 reported that today, an overall positive relationship exists:

I do keep up with him a lot more, but we have a lot of shared interests. We talk on a regular basis; we get together on a regular basis. He lives within about an hour and a half of me.

Participant 9 contrasted participant 1 and 10's positive descriptions of paternal involvement with one whose father's involvement was viewed in a less than positive light:

Especially in my dad's case, because he was kind of the ... I don't know the word for it but like, when I got in trouble, he was the one I guess that determined what my punishment was, how long I was grounded or whatever. My relationship with my dad then, it almost seemed like he was around for me when I got in trouble, but not necessarily for the cool things that I did.

Dad as a "friend"

A variant number of participants (4 out of 10) posited viewing their father as a "friend" was an important factor in the parent/child relationship.

Participant 8 stated, “It’s kind of like he can be a dad, but he can also be a friend as well.”

Participant 2 reported a distant relationship with their father as a child but now describes their relationships as a friendship or collegial, stating:

Yeah. Like some of the times I’ve visited, like he’ll be gone some of it. He’ll come back for like a day or two where like he’ll take me out to the bar. We’ll have like a drink and play some pool and just like shoot the shit about whatever’s going on, you know?

Deployment Cycle

The second domain that emerged from the iterative analytic process is comprised of several categories related to the deployment cycle. These categories relate to how the deployment experience itself impacted their perceptions of the relationship with their fathers.

The domain *Deployment Cycle* is composed of four categories: (a) shifting family events, (b) deployment is hard for the family, (c) deployment shifted routine of the family, and (d) experience of distress/anxiety.

Shifting Family Events

Participants typically (5 out of 10) endorsed the shifting of family significant events (i.e. major holidays and birthdays) as significant aspects of the deployment cycle experience. Participant 10 noted, “You just have to carry on. It was you get in what you can by way of conversation or holidays even. There were Christmases not there, birthdays not there.”

Participant 8 reported the additional effort put forth by their father for significant events was especially meaningful. “I wouldn’t get to talk to my dad or see him but I’d always have a card there or something, so it wasn’t like he was completely out of the picture.”

Deployment is Hard for the Family

Study participants typically (8 out of 10) reported that the deployment cycle was hard on the family. This category describing family

focused on the negative impacts on the family regarding relationships with all family members, including the deployed parent. Some examples of these negative impacts are increasing discord or distance in relationships.

Participant 4 reported the following regarding the difficulty of deployment:

I mean, if I had to draw a general trend line I would probably say that it was, you know, we really missed dad or mom or whoever is gone, and it's really tough. He did a lot, right, I mean, he kind of worked the system as much as he could to kind of avoid big deployments and just because my mom couldn't take it.

Participant 9 reported the following regarding their parent's marriage:

I guess he (father) was talking to her (mother) fairly recently and she talked about how kind of the same thing about how he'd always be different after deployments and she expressed at one point, she wasn't sure if he would ever go back to being normal.

Participant 5 corroborated participant 9's experience, specifically noting the distress experienced by the participant's mother:

A lot more hectic just because where my dad would step in and help with certain things with my mom. She didn't have that anymore. She was just a little bit more stressed. I think my sister and I felt that tension from her and like rolled over into our lives even though we weren't greatly affected because my mom worked so hard not to let us be but just knowing that she was so stressed made us on edge.

Deployment Shifted Routine of the Family

Study participants generally (9 out of 10) endorsed the shifting of familial routines as a pertinent aspect of their deployment cycle experiences. Participant 2 noted a striking difference in the daily routine following their father's return from deployment:

Like me and my sister we always did everything for ourselves, like when to get ready, how to get prepared for school. And he was just yelling. His first day back he was like, "Do this and do that, and

you're going to miss the bus and stuff." And finally, I looked at him and I was like, 'Look, every single day for a year, like I've done this without you. Do you really think I need your help today?'

Experience of Distress/Anxiety

Participants typically (6 out of 10) discussed distress and anxiety as salient aspects of their deployment cycle experiences. Participant 10 discussed the lead-up to a deployment as especially stress inducing, "Well, it's just a feeling of impending doom so-to-speak. You know that it's getting ready to happen; there's absolutely nothing you could do about it."

Participant 1 reported the following pertaining to maintaining the paternal relationship:

I guess, ...my dad would call sometimes if he was able to and being on the phone with him, I then got anxiety about when he was going to hang up. Like, I needed to make sure that I talked to him before he hung up.

Participant 8 presented negative emotion during deployment, as well as means of coping:

Just like shoving, shove it aside ... Act like there's nothing going on and then occasionally it would hit me a few times... like I remember that morning I got to school pretty early, and I was pretty sad that he was gone, but like when I said goodbye and all of that not... it was just like, "Okay, bye. See you in six months." Yeah, so I think my kind of way is it's like avoid the problem 'til it goes away and that's still how I am I guess...

Military Culture

A domain pertaining to the impact of military culture on the participants' experiences emerged. This domain covered a myriad of cultural norms and mores specific to all military families as well as those experiencing the deployment of a parent. This domain is comprised of four

categories: (a) transience in personal relationships, (b) dad's absence became routine, (c) sacrifices, (d) military values.

Transience in Personal Relationships

Study participants typically reported (8 out of 10) regular changes and shifts in relationships were an important aspect of their experience. The most common report from participants was the regularity with which new friends had to be made due to the participants' moving, or their friends going to a new base. Participant 4 stated the following, "When you move around so often, you know, the friendships and whatnot you kind of develop are almost temporary, whereas the familial relationships are, you know, that's what you have for life."

Participant 10 shared a similar sentiment regarding platonic relationships, "Honestly those relationships they still are very difficult for me. My dad always had a saying about know the difference between friends and acquaintances."

Dad's Absence Became Routine

The next aspect of military culture, especially during the high points of OEF and OIF, was the normalcy of parents' deployment for friends, classmates, and peers. Participants (10 out of 10) endorsed this category as a salient aspect of their experiences. Participant 9 reported, "I just think that growing up military kind of means recognizing your dad might not come home. If he does, you might not really know who he is."

Sacrifices

An additional component of the culture of military families are sacrifices. This category was typically endorsed (5 out of 10) by participants. While the participants did not make the decision to make the sacrifices inherent with a parent's military service, they were certainly subjected to them. Participant 8 noted a lack of a "home" was one of the major sacrifices made by military families. "For me I think the biggest thing was you were never, like you really didn't have like a 100% place to call home. I think that's the thing that resonated with me the most."

Participant 1 responded to the first question as follows. “Oh, man. I would say it means sacrifices. Like you’re always giving something up. Like time with my dad or living in a not so cool of a town. I don’t know, it’s always something.”

Military Values

Participants typically (5 out of 10) posited military values were important. Participant 8 noted the value of military community: “Wherever you went it was like you were instantly part of a community. Everyone took you in, whereas opposed to the non-military.” Participant 10 noted difficulty growing up in a culture with specific values, “Sometimes I do struggle with understanding things even as an adult when someone will say something, I’m like, ‘I just don’t get that at all.’ I know what it’s from now so that makes it better.”

Changes in Perspective

The final domain that emerged dealt with changes in perspective. Data pertaining to the categories of (a) reflecting on the past and (b) understanding the present emerged.

Reflecting on the Past

Participants generally (9 out of 10) reflected on the past, acknowledging a deeper understanding of childhood. Participant 7 reported a deeper understanding of their father. “I would say that despite all the times he was cold, and military-like, and demanded perfection, and stuff, I knew that he only did those things because he wanted the best for all of us.”

Participant 9 also endorsed an understanding of their father’s military experiences:

My dad was gone a lot growing up, for various reasons, and I didn’t really get it. I knew that he was doing work and I knew that he was serving his country and especially because my dad worked in security and he was a military police officer and a sniper, I knew that a lot of the stuff that he was doing was dangerous. There kind of wasn’t a guarantee when your dad is gone, you don’t necessarily

know if he's coming back, but I don't think I still quite understood that as a kid.

Participant 9 reflected on current understanding of post-deployment behavior.

It was just frustrating, I think. To me, it came off as being childish. Now that I'm older, I think that we're learning a little bit more about PTSD and stuff like that. I think that might've been part of what was going on. I don't think he would admit to that and I don't know if he's ever been diagnosed with that but I think that might've ... Because it was, you know he's shooting people and people are shooting at you and you don't know.

Understanding the Present

Study participants typically (7 out of 10) postulated a better understanding of the present is a salient aspect. Participant 5 noted she has a clearer perspective in her own marriage:

My husband is military. I think knowing the back side of that and knowing how it operates and how it's very political in the sense that you've got to schmooze this guy and you've got to be respectful here and you've got to play this role and how stressful it can be on the active duty member.

Discussion

Two qualitative studies explored this population Walsh et al., (2014) studied parental experience while Huebner et al., (2007) examined the child's perspective. Though both studies provided information, this is the first known study to examine long-term implications of deployment.

Factors Impacting Relationship with Dad

Four categories arose: (a) communication, (b) dad's personality, (c) dad's involvement with children, and (d) dad as a "friend." One pattern within this domain was the quality of communication and subsequently, paternal involvement. These salient categories influence the domain of

“Changes in Perspective.” Specifically, participants who endorsed an ability to reflect on the past and make meaning of their present situations, reported communication with their formerly deployed fathers as important to that process. This illustrates these domains do not act as singular players in the experiences of this population, but rather work in concert.

Deployment Cycle

In this domain, four components or categories emerged: (a) shifting family events, (b) deployment is hard for the family, (c) deployment shifted routine of the family, and (d) experience of distress/anxiety. These four categories interact in several ways. Specifically, the categories within this domain are found within three layers of the nested arrangement of EST.

The category of “deployment is hard for the family” occurs in the microsystem. The interpersonal nature of difficulties within the family are evident in participants’ statements. The interactions of aspects of the microsystem link the mesosystem within this domain. The intrapersonal experiences (distress/anxiety) further impact relationships with other family members such as the at-home caregiver and siblings. The aspect of the exosystem at play in this domain is the parent’s career. The “Deployment Cycle” domain and its categories result from the career of the deployed parent. Thus, the mesosystem and microsystem impacts examined in this domain occur under the umbrella of the exosystem.

Military Culture

The four categories in this domain are: (a) transience in personal relationships, (b) dad’s absence became routine, (c) sacrifices, and (d) military values. This domain emphasizes the microsystem, specifically changes in relationships.

The mesosystem is prominent within this domain as various players within the microsystem interact. For instance, familial stressors impact the participants’ peer relationships.

The exosystem is prominent, as a common factor for changes within the microsystem and mesosystem is paternal careers. A military childhood led to unique experiences, such as living and attending school on a military

base. The military also impacted the previously mentioned friendships, as participants described making new friends in military communities was easier as peers understood cultural norms and mores.

Impacts of the military are not solely within the “Military Values” domain. The category referencing the regularity of a father’s absence plays a role in the domain illustrating the factors impacting the paternal relationship. Regular absence in relationships infiltrates a child’s view of their father as a “friend” and, overtly, the extent to which a father can be involved in their child’s life, as illustrated in the domain, “Dad’s involvement with Children.”

Changes in Perspective

The final domain involved consisted of two categories: (a) reflecting on the past and (b) understanding the present. Expanding upon previous domains, this domain includes all 5 layers of EST. In the literature review, it was not expected that the Chronosystem would play a role. However, participants referenced how changes in their lives, over time, impacted their understanding of childhood. Participants described how perceptions of their military childhood impact current relationships with their parents, and their own spouses and children (see figure 1).

Individual

Before examining the 5 layers of EST it is critical to examine the inner experience of the individual. Participants endorsed internal distress stemming from the deployment cycle. This distress manifested as anxiety regarding the well-being of their deployed parent. This anxiety corroborates literature positing internal distress in this population during deployment (Reed et al., 2011). Results also corroborate distress during reintegration (RAND, 2011). However, participants did not report these internal anxieties continue their manifestation into early adulthood. This suggests such negative outcomes for this population may dissipate over time.

Microsystem

The domain “Factors Impacting Relationship with Dad” covers components leading to the quality of relationship with a father. The participants’ relationships with their fathers stands as a component of participants making meaning of their childhood, as well as discerning how to approach their current relationship with their father. Additionally, participants endorsed their relationship with their father as impacting how they make meaning of their current status as a spouse and parent.

The microsystem connected several domains. Outside of the father/child relationship, other relationships within the family unit emerged. Within the domain of “Factors Impacting Relationship with Dad,” participants often referenced themselves in relation to being part of a family unit rather than a singular entity in relation to their military parent. In the domain “Deployment Cycle,” participants noted strains of the deployment and subsequent reintegration phase on their at-home caregivers and their siblings.

Peers are a core component of the microsystem. Participants shared a notion of “sacrifice” in the domain “Military Culture.” Participants noted it was commonplace to move regularly and friendships with peers were often lost.

Mesosystem

The mesosystem stands as the interactions between microsystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1994). One example of such an interaction comes from the domain “Military Culture.” Transience in personal relationships represents interactions of the microsystems of school friendships, and families. This aspect of the Mesosystem was typically endorsed by participants.

An example of the mesosystem was found within the “Deployment Cycle” domain. Participants discussed how the deployment itself led to changes in routines in the family unit and participation in extracurricular activities (with one participant noting driver’s education). Participants endorsed negative affective impacts during and immediately following their parent’s deployment. These affective concerns, while primarily a mental

health concern, had an impact on participants' families. Those stressors within the family unit may impact interactions with peers, performance at school, and interactions with community members.

Exosystem

The exosystem incorporates entities or systems in which the individual is not an active participant (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). An overt example of an exosystem in this study is the military itself. The domain of "Deployment Cycle" abundantly illustrated the exosystem. This domain clearly demonstrates the functional impact of the exosystem, in this case the deployment, on the individual and several critical microsystems at play in the participants' development. The military played a critical role in determining where these participants lived (8 out of 10).

When living overseas, the military-lead education systems (i.e. Department of Defense schools) determined when participants changed schools. The all-encompassing nature of the military and thus, the exosystem, cannot be understated as it relates to participants' childhoods.

Macrosystem

The culture of the military was woven into the experiences of participants. Military culture normalized the transience in relationships with peers. Participants spoke about frequent permanent changes of their father's duty station. Additionally, participants endorsed the infrequency with which their fathers were present due to deployment was the norm.

Junger (2016) posits for service members, deployments are an experience that lead to strong views about war and America that differ from civilians or service members who did not deploy. This 'othering from society' may permeate to the family. The members of the population identify the idiosyncrasies of military culture as a formative aspect of development.

The culture of the military significantly impacted the domain "Deployment Cycle." Participants often endorsed that upon their father's return from deployment, the parent/child relationship could be difficult due to their father having been steeped in military culture without their family

for the duration of a deployment. Additionally, the unique cultural norms of a deployment, as opposed to those present when on base in the United States, also impacted the participants' perception of their relationship with their formerly deployed parent.

The macrosystem became present in the "Changes in Perspective" domain. Participants reported more understanding and appreciation for their fathers as members of the military. Participants indicated an increased ability to delineate between their fathers as individuals, as men, as opposed to service members. This shift in perspective yields improved relationships. One participant noted while his father holds more conservative views that were in part shaped by the military, they enjoy a good relationship despite philosophical differences.

Chronosystem

The chronosystem emerged as relevant in the participants' experiences, incorporating changes over the lifespan. The relevance of the chronosystem proved surprising as it was not anticipated it would prove germane to the study.

Participants' ability to take perspective on their childhoods and parental deployment proved salient. Participants revealed the difficulties that existed during the deployment cycle were mitigated and, in some cases, fully resolved. An ability to better understand this was revealed in the domain "Changes in Perspective."

One specific aspect of this pertains to communication with their formerly deployed parent. Participants reported an overall improvement in communication with their formerly deployed parent. Ranging from a détente to disclosing their parent was a close confidant, communication patterns appeared to improve.

Participants posited a military upbringing and parental deployment informed their understanding of the world. From uncertainty about paying utility bills to fostering an understanding of their military spouse, the cultural norms, mores, and experiences of childhood evolved and manifest in new behaviors.

Participants had clear perspectives on their parental deployment. These included their own family relationships and their understanding of

military culture. No prior qualitative studies sampling this population discuss this impact. Bronfenbrenner's EST facilitates understanding the depth of the deployment experience into the adult lives of children.

Limitations

Though this study garnered valuable information, there are several important limitations that are worthy of additional comment. The sample gathered for this study included individuals who exclusively experienced the deployment of their fathers. The experiences for members of this population who experienced the deployment of their mother may yield significantly different problems during the deployment cycle as well as during early adulthood.

A limitation is the racial/ethnic representation. Nine of the participants in the study self-identified as Caucasian, while one self-identified as Latino. This is a noteworthy limitation as this sample does not accurately represent the racial diversity within the armed forces. According to the Assistant Secretary of Defense (2015) 68% of active duty service members identify as Caucasian, 17% identify as Black or African-American, 4% identify as Asian, 2% identify as Native or Indigenous, 3% identify as multi-racial, and 4% identify as Other/Unknown.

The range of cumulative deployments experienced by the participants stands as a limitation of the study. Though all participants met the criterion of a minimum of 13 cumulative months of deployment the range of experience beyond that marker was significant, with participants reporting 14-50 months of cumulative deployment.

Although the participants appeared to have a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds during their childhood, as indicated by parental rank, current socioeconomic status (SES) was not evaluated for this study. Therefore, it is not possible to say whether SES or other economic factors had an impact on the experience of the participants in this sample. Additional research that attends more closely to SES, social class, and related factors would be an important addition to this body of research.

An additional potential limitation is the bias the team revealed prior analysis. The potential influence of bias is regularly cited as a shortcoming of CQR and qualitative research. One bias identified by the group was that

two of the analysis team members grew up in military families. Though checks were conducted to ensure fidelity to the CQR process, it is not possible to fully ensure their experiences did not influence analysis.

Implications for Research and Practice

Results from this study have implications for research moving forward. It would prove beneficial to conduct an additional study examining the experiences of those who went through the deployment of a mother or deployment of both parents simultaneously causing the child/children to stay with a care-giver.

Given the participants were disproportionately Caucasian compared to the demographics of active duty service members, it would prove beneficial to understand the experiences of minority young adults, as racial and ethnic minorities in the United States are significantly more likely to experience chronic stress from discrimination (Bahls, 2011). Understanding the experiences of minority young adults who experienced parental military deployment will provide a more accurate representation of the military as a whole, and provide psychologists nuanced approaches to appropriately mitigate negative outcomes stemming from a parent's deployment.

Each branch of the military and each military occupational specialty present unique experiences for the military member and their families. Additional research focusing on the experiences of this population based on these factors may facilitate deeper understanding of parental deployment's long-term impacts.

A clinical implication is understanding the role military culture plays in this population's development. The normality of long periods of absence in critical relationships, whether a parent's deployment or the sudden loss of a peer, is salient to understanding relationship development, maintenance, and expectations. Accompanying these relational changes are shifting of routines and significant milestones. Making sense of loss and transience may prove beneficial in settings where attachment and adjustment concerns are prominent.

Clinical attention may focus on the lack of participants' power. Participants referenced deployments, friends moving, and their own moves. This lack of power and control occurred throughout childhood, not simply

during deployments. Thus, attending to power dynamics in clinicals setting is important, not only when a deployment is an aspect of clinical attention.

Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) is a supplementary lens for this population (Jordan, 2010). RCT should not operate as a stand-alone orientation, but should lend itself to examining relationships in a clinical context. RCT is developmental in nature and posits individuals grow through and toward connections with others. RCT asserts the development of relationships occurs within the context of cultural factors.

Conclusion

The young adults who experienced parental deployments experienced a childhood marked by difficulties and opportunities for growth. Utilizing EST to understand the potential long-term effects of their experiences, several components of this population emerged.

Parents' deployments and growing up in a military family played an important role in the participants' upbringings. Participants identified four domains that best encompass their experiences: a) factors impacting relationship with dad, b) deployment cycle, c) military culture, d) changes in perspective. These domains define the salient aspects of the deployment experience as well as important relational factors. These domains also serve as a lens to better understand the current parent/child relationship and the impact of the military on their present-day lives. Perhaps most importantly, this study provided a deeper understanding of a population whose childhoods were shaped by military interventions at the beginning of the 21st century.

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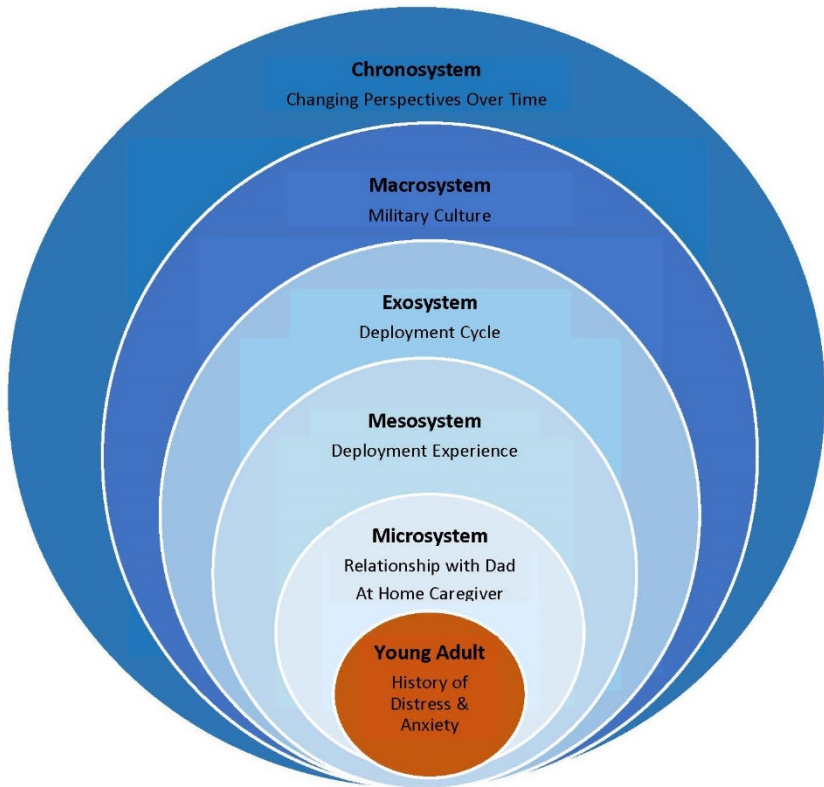


Figure 1. Emergent Themes within an Ecological Systems Theory (EST) Model.

Table 1. Participant Demographics.

Participant Branch	Gender Active/ Reserve	Parent Rank	Age(s) at Deployment Base Housing	Current age On(1) or Off (2)	Ethnicity	Deployed Parent Gender	Deployment Lengths	
1 Active	Female Enlisted		2, 5, 6, 6, 1, 2, 2, 2, 7, 8, 10, 2, 2, 2	25	Caucasian	Male	2, 2, 1, 1, 6, 6, 1	Air Force
2 Active	Male Officer		13, 14, 15, 2, 2, 1, 1, 1, 16, 18	23	Latino	Male	9, 12, 10, 10, 9	Air Force
3 Active	Female Officer		12, 13, 17, 2, 2, 2	24	Caucasian	Male	6, 6, 4	Air Force
4 Active	Male Enlisted		7, 8, 10, 12, 2, 1, 1, 1	24	Caucasian	Male	2, 6, 1, 6	Air Force
5 Reserve	Female Enlisted		8, 12, 2, 2	24	Caucasian	Male	12, 6	Air Force
6 Active	Male Enlisted		5, 9, 11, 13, 1, 1, 1, 1	23	Caucasian	Male	4, 4, 4, 2	Air Force
7 Active	Male Enlisted		6, 12, 16, 1, 1, 1	25	Caucasian	Male	6, 9, 6	Army
8 Active	Female Officer		7, 9, 1, 1	19	Caucasian	Male	6, 8	Air Force
9 Active	Female Enlisted		3, 8, 10, 13, 1, 1, 1, 1	24	Caucasian	Male	6, 6, 8, 4	Army
10 Active	Female Enlisted		3, 15, 1, 1	25	Caucasian	Male	18, 12	Air Force

Table 2. Domains and Categories that Emerged during Data Analysis.

Domain	Category	Frequency of Response
Factors Impacting	Communication	Typical
Relationship with Dad	Dad's Personality	Typical
	Dad's Involvement with Children	General
	Dad as a "friend"	Variant
Deployment Cycle	Shifting Family Events	Typical
	Deployment is Hard for the Family	Typical
	Deployment Shifted Routine of the Family	General
	Experience of Distress/Anxiety	Typical
Military Culture	Transience in Personal Relationships	Typical
	Dad's Absence Became Routine	General
	Sacrifices	Typical
	Military Values	Typical
Changes in Perspective	Reflecting on the Past	General
	Understanding the Present	Typical