AN EXPLORATION OF THE COMING HOME PROCESS FOR MILITARY COUPLES

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Abstract

This study aimed to understand the lived experience of the military couple during post-deployment through a qualitative lens. Participants were either service members of any branch of the United States military or a partner of a service member. The service member and partner must have experienced a deployment while co-habitating at some point in time following September 11, 2001. All participants completed an online qualitative survey. The qualitative approach used to analyze the data was interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). The data was analyzed for themes which were identified as fitting within four domains: strengths, challenges, family beliefs/practices, and social support. The themes identified within these domains is as follows: 1) Strengths: Adaptability, flexibility, patience, support; 2) Challenges: Family roles and personal growth; 3) Family beliefs/practices: Rhythms, equality, time; and 4) Social support: Church, peers, family. One theme, communication, did not fit within a single domain but rather spanned across several. The information gathered in this study helped to reveal what kinds of strengths service members and their partners possessed and how these strengths aided them in navigating post deployment. The data gathered in this study can be useful to various groups, including civilians who work with military families, military command structures, and policy makers who influence deployment tempos and military family relocation.

*Keywords*: military, couples, qualitative, deployment, co-habitate, strengths, family

AN EXPLORATION OF THE COMING HOME PROCESS FOR MILITARY COUPLES

There are currently 1.3 million citizens serving in the active duty component of the United States military (Defense Manpower Data Center [DMDC], 2016). Since September 11, 2001, a total of over 2.7 million service members have served on 5.4 million deployments (Sheppard, 2010; Wenger, O’Connell, & Conttrel, 2018). Of these active duty personnel, over half are married (DMDC, 2016; Military One Source, 2015). This number does not include service members who are co-habitating with a non-married partner; thus, the overall number of partnered service members is likely to be even higher. As of 2015, active duty service members comprised only 0.4% of the U.S. population, which means the operational stressors and responsibilities of our military are being shouldered by a small number of citizens (DMDC, 2016). Therefore, it is important to understand how military couples not only survive but thrive while dealing with the rigors of military life.

As the United States enters its 18th year of continued operations in the Middle East, an increase in stress for both the service members and their families is being observed (Hosek, 2006; Sheppard, 2010). For example, deployment has been found to impact feelings of loneliness, anxiety, depression, burden, and guilt (Caska & Renshaw, 2011; SteelFisher, Zaslavsky, & Blendon, 2008). Deployment also places stress on military families that include changes to physical well-being, marital satisfaction, psychological well-being, and continual fear for service member safety (Burrell, Adams, Durand, & Castro, 2006). The development of psychological symptoms in military spouses have been found to correlate with deployment experiences and include depression, anxiety, sleep disorders, acute stress reactions, and adjustment disorders (De Burgh, White, Fear, & Iversen, 2011). Yet, there is also evidence that service members and their families can experience positive benefits from deployment such as personal growth, independence, and newfound friendships in addition to a sense of pride in the partner’s ability to maintain the household during deployment (Newby, McCarroll, Ursano, Zizhong, Shigemura, & Tucker-Harris, 2005; Wood, Scarville, & Gravino, 1995). Deployment is also a time where service members are able to utilize their training and participate in meaningful work (Hosek, 2006).

After returning home, the service member and their family are both faced with a new set of challenges. These challenges arise during what is called post-deployment, the time in which a service member and their family are tasked with coming together as a single-family unit again (Joint Services Program, 2018). Deployment and post deployment re-integration are known to be a period of both significant stress and positive growth for the military couple (Adler, Bartone, & Britt, 2001; Hosek, 2006; Wood et al., 1995). It is important to understand the factors that contribute to the process of a service member folding back into the family during this phase of military life. In order to do so, we need a richer, more detailed understanding of service members’ and their families’ experience during post-deployment reintegration.

## Operational Definitions

It is important to establish the definition of a family. Although the definitions in the literature vary, for the purposes of this study a family will be defined as a composition of two or more persons who are brought together over time by mutual consent who, together, assume responsibilities for familial functions (Benzies and Mychasiuk, 2009; Vanier Institute of the Family, 2004). For the purposes of this study, a couple must be co-habitating but not necessarily married. Lastly, when determining the appropriate period of time to consider "post-deployment" the researchers will refer to the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program (Joint Services Program, 2018), which describes post-deployment as the first 180 days after the service member returns to their home station.

When the word service member is used below it refers to a male service member with a female civilian partner. The word partner refers to a female civilian partner. This nomenclature is used due to the participants of the study falling into two categories: male service members and female civilian partners. This was a by-product of the sample methods and the population being sampled; it was not an intentional parameter within the study.

## Deployment Cycle

A military deployment consists of several stages. The model we are referencing is used by the Yellow Ribbon Reintegration Program, one of the many programs in the Joint Service Support Network aimed at providing support to all service members and their families (Joint Services Program, 2018).

First there is pre-deployment, which lasts from a service member's first notification of deployment until deployment occurs. Second there is the deployment phase: from departure until demobilization. Demobilization is the third stage where the units arrive at the demobilization station and it lasts until they arrive at their home station. This is the point in the deployment where the service member is no longer deployed but still not reunited with their families.

Last is the post-deployment stage: this is the arrival at home through 180 days after arrival. In this stage, the service member and their family begin the process of rejoining each other and it is the stage of deployment on which this study will focus. In post-deployment the family unit is progressing through the various challenges and joys that accompany this process.

Life in the military is both a rewarding and stressful experience for service members and their partners. Being in the military means being in a constant state of readiness to either deploy or relocate. Managing a deployment cycle involves heightened occupational stressors for the service member and an increase in familial roles and expectations for the civilian partner. Both the service member and the partner, when reunited after a deployment, are different people than when they separated.

There is a general paucity of literature focused on reintegration of the military couple as a single unit. Most research is done on one member of a military couple. Data collection occurs without regard for having both members of a single couple present (Marek & D’Aniello, 2014).

## Stressors of Deployment and Post-Deployment Reintegration

**Impact on the service member.** Aspects of deployment that service members have found difficult include working within the chain of command, being away from home, and deterioration of their significant relationships (Newby, McCarroll, Ursano, Shigemura, & Tucker-Harris, 2005; Ogle & Young, 2016). The above deployment stressors are complicated by findings which suggest married service members are more negatively affected psychologically than their non-married counterparts when exposed to similar levels of combat stress (Gewirtz, DeGarmo, Polusny, Khaylis, & Erbes, 2010; Watkins, Lee, and Zamorski, 2017). The hypothesis is that increased familial demands faced by married service members when they return home create additional stressors on top of what every service member experiences while deployed. These additional stressors increase the complexity of coping with combat exposure while attempting to maintain and reintegrate into a household. It is also possible that poor marital satisfaction acts as a mediator in the service member’s ability to cope with combat stress (Gewirtz et al., 2010; Watkins 2017). A service member’s dissatisfaction with their marriage can make it more difficult to successfully reintegrate into life at home. It may be possible that those with poor marital satisfaction do not view that relationship as a support and it reduces the coping resources they have to manage combat stress. These findings support the assumption that life as a military couple involves unique stressors that may complicate mental health symptoms. The numbers have varied over the years but Marek and D'Aniello (2014) found that 70% of service members across the branches returning home from a deployment cite PTSD as having a moderate level of interference in their life. Another 22% stated that it interferes with their lives a lot.

### For some military families, the act of reintegrating after a deployment is challenging. Military families are often used to challenges but reintegration comes with its own unique difficulties. Researchers have found that, after returning home from a combat deployment, some service members have difficulty finding something in their lives as meaningful as the life and death missions they conducted overseas (Bowling and Sherman, 2007). Other stressors present for service members at the time of post deployment include mental health concerns, adjusting to physical injuries, emotional destabilization, and financial problems (American Psychological Association [APA], 2007).

Another challenge is that, upon return, the service member may feel like they no longer fit into the family routine and are otherwise not a necessary component to the family structure (Riggs & Riggs, 2012). This feeling may be intensified by intrapersonal feelings of emotional and physical exhaustion that make the process of being present and connected to the partner and family that much more challenging (Marek and D'Aniello, 2014). Navigating the redefining of roles can be a difficult feat to accomplish. As noted in Bowling and Sherman (2008), flexibility and communication are paramount to that success as well as both partners allowing space for one another to adjust to the new roles and the inevitable transition period that is required during this process.

Another key component to a successful reintegration is creating intimacy in the relationship through self-disclosure (Marek & D’Aniello, 2014). This can be hard for the service member because soldiers may feel they can only be understood by fellow soldiers or that the only acceptable emotion to show is anger (Bowling and Sherman, 2008; Cox, 2012).

### Impact on the spouse/partner. On the home front, the civilian partner of a military couple encounters their own unique challenges during a deployment. Frequent transitions across bases and the fear of being alone while the partner is on deployment, coupled with a struggle to become close again after deployment, are a few examples (Burrell, Adams, Durand, & Castro, 2006). Uncertainty about the military partner’s safety and rumination about the precariousness of the occupation, and finding a support network after becoming a military partner are some additional challenges (APA, 2007).

Over the course of a deployment a partner is tasked with being the sole proprietor of the household. They make the important household decisions and they maintain the stateside responsibilities of the family while the service member is away. When the service member returns, the couple must now renegotiate household roles and responsibilities. This redistribution can be challenging because both the service member and the partner have changed as a result of the deployment (Riggs & Riggs, 2012). If there are children involved this process is further complicated by the necessity to show a unified front in terms of discipline and childcare when previously, during deployment, these roles were being fulfilled by only the partner (DeVoe & Ross, 2012).

### In one study, women stated that their civilian friends no longer understood them and reported that attempting to integrate into the hierarchy of the army wife life was stressful (Larsen, Clauss-Ehlers, and Cosden, 2015). The process of preparing for a deployment is full of complex emotions. One military partner described it as "this fear of being alone was coupled with the struggle to experience closeness during this difficult time, while also needing distance to cope with the emotional difficulty of an impending departure" (Larsen et al., 2015, pp. 216). This quote exemplifies the difficulties that precipitate the upcoming deployment of a military service member. Additionally, when partners of military service members were asked about the impact that PTSD symptoms had on their relationship with the service member, 100% of the partners said that PTSD had at least a moderate impact on their family. These numbers speak to the high impact that deployment has on a military couple’s ability to successfully reintegrate into family life post-deployment (Marek and D'Aniello, 2014; Melvin, Gross, Hayat, Jennings, & Campbell, 2012; Newby, McCarroll, Ursano, Shigemura, & Tucker-Harris, 2005).

## Positive Outcome of Deployment

As we have seen, the current state of the literature surrounding familial stress is not always consistent with the literature surrounding military families. Benzies and Mychusiak (2009) examined familial resilience from a general perspective while Allen, Rhoades, Stanley and Markman (2011) collected data specifically on Army couples. While Benzies and Mychusiak (2009) found social support to be vital in dealing with familial stress, Allen et al (2011) found that social connections did not correlate with familial stress. In another study, the researchers found that service members with greater military experience, defined as years in service plus family history of service, reported equal stress during reintegration as soldiers with no military experience (Allen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2011). This finding is inconsistent with prior literature and exemplifies the necessity of parsing out the details of the lived experience of military families to better understand their experiences. By looking at both the consistencies and the disparities between general family resilience literature and the literature focused on specific members of a military couple we can see that, while certain evidence for protective factors and stressors found in general family systems holds true for military families, this is not always the case. It stands to reason that the unique situation military families live in creates unique stressors as well as unique protective factors, both of which thus far have not been explored in the literature with enough detail.

The concept that wartime deployment is universally negative has yet to bare out in the literature (Bonanno, 2008; Larsen et al, 2015; Sayers, 2010). A major component to this is a lack of integration of the literature that is focused on protective factors with the literature focused on the negative impact of deployment on family functioning. The literature thus far tends to ask for experiences that are either positive or negative, but not both. Additionally, the literature on family resilience has yet to focus on couples who live within the context of military life. The research that does exist on military families is not consistent enough to draw any meaningful conclusions across studies. Military families experience enough unique stressors that warrant a more detailed inquiry. What is needed is an understanding of the lived experience of being a military couple that comes from the voices of the couple themselves. This study aims to contribute findings that draw directly from the participants’ stories and experiences as military couples.

Historically much of the literature is focused on the negative consequences of a military deployment. In some areas of burgeoning literature, however, couples do cite positive outcomes of navigating a military deployment. A deployment can be a time to test the strength of the relationship by forcing meaningful conversations and building deeper connections between the partners. In an investigation of utilizing CBT couple's therapy during reintegration, Sayers (2010) found that 9% of married service members reported an improvement of their relationship with their spouse as a result of deployment. Another study that followed a unit assigned to peacekeeping missions in Europe found 77% percent of soldiers reporting some kind of benefit as a result of deployment. The three most reported benefits were: making additional money, self-improvement, and "time to think" (Newby, McCarroll, Ursano, Shigemura, & Tucker-Harris, 2005).

## Current Study

In this study we are attempting to understand the lived experience of the military couple through a qualitative lens and we are hoping to gain valuable information surrounding both the challenges of reintegrating together and also the positive protective factors that make reintegration easier and more meaningful. The literature explored thus far has not examined in detail the experience of post-deployment life. By using a qualitative approach in this study, we are able to gain a richer, more detailed insight into the military couples experience of post-deployment life. The guiding question of the study is as follows: what is the lived experience of the military couple navigating the homecoming process in post-deployment life? Better understanding of how a couple deals with and reacts to stressful events can provide insight into what is detrimental and what is strengthening for military couples. Repeated exposure to stress may be valuable learning experiences for couples that leads to maturation and learning (Palmer, 2008).

The intention of this study is to build on the work that has already been done in the field of military couples research and to provide a unique approach to understanding the lives of military couples as they reintegrate their lives following a deployment. Expanding on what was stated earlier, this study will utilize an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach to collect the stories of military couples going through the experience of post deployment re-integration in an attempt to better understand what strengths and what barriers exist for these couples that mediates the post-deployment experience.

### Method

The qualitative approach used in this study was interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA attempts to explore one's personal experience with the world around them and is concerned with the individual’s perception of an event (Smith, 2015). An acknowledgment must be made when utilizing IPA methodology, which is that there are two layers of interpretation involved in any sort of data gathering. There is the participant attempting to understand their world and there is the researcher attempting to understand the participant (who is attempting to understand their world). This dual layer of abstraction is called a double hermeneutic. It is the reason a researcher chooses to focus their inquiry on the perception of the participant rather than trying to gain an objective understanding of the world. Lastly, IPA is an idiographic approach to research as opposed to a nomothetic approach (Smith, 2015). That is to say, IPA is more interested in the detailed examination of a particular case. In this study, that detailed examination focused on one specific part of the overall deployment cycle of which a military couple is navigating. We were interested in what is happening for the military couple at the point in time when the service member returned home and the couple attempted to navigate family life and re-connect with each other.

In this study, we attempted to better understand the military couples experience as they re-integrated into life at home after a deployment. The researchers did not attempt to make an objective statement regarding re-integration itself but rather tried to bring light to the unique subjective experience of the military couple.

### Participants

Participants must have met the following requirements to be included for participation: be a) a partnered service member of any military branch in the United States Armed Forces who has been deployed since 9/11 or b) a partner of a service member who was deployed since 9/11 and *c)* who were co-habitating at the time of post-deployment. All participants were required to be at least 18 years of age and have access to the internet in order to complete an online qualitative survey. By the end of data collection, 15 total responses were submitted by participants. Eight fit the inclusion criteria of the study. Of the seven ineligible responses, six did not contain any qualitative responses and one did not fit the inclusion criteria of co-habitating during post-deployment. Of the remaining eight responses, five were from female civilian partners of service members and the remaining three were male service members. One participant identified themselves as being in a dual military relationship and answered the survey from the perspective of a male service member. See Table 1 for a full description of participant demographic information.

### Procedure

We utilized a qualitative online survey to gather information about the lived experience of military couples during post-deployment. A table of the survey questions can be found in Appendix A. Disseminating an online qualitative survey was the most appropriate method for data collection because it allowed us to ask open-ended questions while also reaching a wide sample size when compared to performing in-person interviews.

The time frame for recruitment was January to July 2018. Recruitment took place through online postings and listserv postings with organizations relevant to the topic of interest as well as through utilization of current personal military community contacts of the research team such as friends and family currently serving in the military or with knowledge of eligible participants, members of the Oregon Army National Guard, and the secondary networks of those primary contacts. The online sources included, but were not limited to, The APA Division 19 listserv, military.com (support website for military members and families), and milspouse.com (a support website for military spouses). No incentives were offered to participants.

The survey was administered through a private Qualtrics survey account accessible only by the research team consisting of the primary student researcher, the two faculty supervisors, and a research assistant. The full survey can be found in Table 2 of this paper. The survey began with an introduction to the survey structure and the informed consent. After agreeing to participate, the first page was basic demographic questions. After demographics, the survey included three open-ended questions each covering the broad theme of the information we intended to gather. The question that guided the construction of the following survey items is as follows: What is the lived experience of the military couple navigating the homecoming process in post-deployment life?

The research questions of this study, which can be found in Table 2, were based on the findings of a qualitative study by Larsen et al (2015). These researchers attempted to identify protective factors involved in deployment as it was perceived by Army wives. In doing so the authors identified three domains that their findings were grouped into: individual coping, family beliefs/practices, and sociocultural processes. For the current study we used these three domains as reference points for the development of our questions.

After completing the survey, participants were offered resources for military couple support services and reintegration services and thanked for their participation and service. This survey was an anonymous survey. Identifying information, if any was provided, was removed from survey data. After data collection the survey responses were coded and analyzed by the primary researcher and the research assistant who was a graduate student from Pacific University trained in qualitative research methodology.

### Data Analysis

After survey completion, responses were collected and identifying information was removed. Responses were otherwise reproduced verbatim for analysis. According to IPA theory, the process of analyzing qualitative responses begins at the detailed idiographic level and focuses on one case at a time before moving to a more broad level generalization of concepts between transcripts (Smith, 2015). Reading the text on multiple occasions was important in order for the researchers to become familiar with the text. Therefore, the researchers read through the survey responses of each participant several times to get an overall understanding of the individual survey. In total, two readings of individual surveys occurred before any analysis was performed to help make sense of the text and aid in gaining additional insight into its meaning. This process was performed for all responses before any coding occurred. After that, the researchers returned to the individual survey responses and began coding. Statements pertaining to the lived experience of being a military couple were focused on and coded for their meaning. While still focusing on one survey response, these codes were then clustered by similarity and given a theme. This theme was more abstract than the individual codes but still connected back to the primary source material. For example, results that spoke to participants having to re-familiarize themselves with family roles or getting back into routines fell under the theme of *rhythms*. As themes were identified they, too, were clustered together to identify which themes were primary themes and which were sub-themes. During this phase it was important to refer back to the source material often to ensure commonality of themes was supported by the text. This process was repeated for each survey response. As researchers progressed across surveys, the researcher looked for themes that emerged among multiple survey responses.

To account for the possibility of a disparity in the amount of survey responses between service members and partners, attempts were made to analyze survey responses in a one-to-one fashion to maintain equal number of both participant types (service member and partner). By the end of data collection, however, there was a lower number of service member participants when compared to partner participants. So, the researchers decided to use all eligible survey responses which resulted in uneven numbers of total participant types. Data was analyzed as it was collected in an attempt to reach a saturation of themes. Saturation of themes was identified as the point in data analyses when no new themes emerged for two consecutive responses as agreed upon by two or more members of the researcher team (Smith, 2015). Unfortunately data collection had to be terminated prior to reaching a saturation of themes.

### Social Location and Researcher Bias

As the researcher who conducted the dissemination and collection of participant survey responses and performed the coding of transcripts, it is important to be aware of my entry point into the research as well as making the reader aware of possible biases I may have. I have taken steps to become aware of and minimize the influence that my biases may have on the research; however, it is impossible to completely sever oneself from one's biases. At the time of data collection and interpretation the primary student researcher was a member of the Air Force and upon completion of his doctorate degree will be working as a clinical psychologist in an active duty capacity. Given my affiliation with the Air Force, the tendency may be to over-analyze or otherwise focus too closely on the positive aspects that result from a military life.

That being said, my own closeness to the research may have a positive influence as well. For starters, being a member, even at a broad level, of the group that I am attempting to understand gives me a certain amount of credibility with that group. There is an opportunity for me to be seen as less of an outsider probing for information and more as a curious member of the in-group. Being a member of the military and researching the experience of other members of the military means I have an interest in seeing my participants represented fairly and will do my best to ensure that happens.

Regardless of the benefits and risks of my affiliation with the Air Force it is important to take steps to minimize the impact of any bias on the research process. To address potential bias, I first engaged in bracketing through reflective journaling. Bracketing is the practice of mitigating preconceptions that the researcher may have towards the research subjects or the data. It is an attempt by the researcher to build and maintain self-awareness surrounding their role as a research tool and how they can impact the interpretation of qualitative data (Tufford & Newman, 2012). Bracketing is a process that the researcher engaged in throughout the research project. Additionally, to ensure the accuracy of the results, a research assistant was involved in the transcription coding and analysis process. Also, two Pacific University faculty members not affiliated with the military oversaw the research study.

# Results

**Themes**

The data extracted from eligible surveys was divided into four domains: strengths, challenges, family beliefs/practices, and social support. Within these domains are the main themes identified within participant responses and are discussed in detail below. One theme, communication, did not fit within a single domain but rather spanned across several.

### Strengths: Adaptability, flexibility, patience, support. When asked about strengths, both of themselves and their partners, participants most commonly mentioned flexibility, adaptability, and adjusting well to new situations. One partner stated, “my husband is highly adaptable.” Another said, “my husband’s strengths during re-integration were his ability to quickly and easily adapt to new situations and his easy-going, go with the flow attitude.” She continued to say, “He has always demonstrated a considerable amount of flexibility.” She attributed this flexibility to being a necessary trait for those in the military, as they are given “little control over what they do and where they go.” Patience, understanding, and being open about what one needs from their partner were also commonly mentioned as strengths. One male service member mentioned his “self-restraint” as a strength however he gave no further explanation as to what he meant by this. Most commonly male service members identified their ability to fall back into roles in the relationship and being flexible as their strengths, with one service member identifying his strengths as “flexibility and understanding”.

When asked what their partner brought to re-integration, one service member said, “support, understanding, patience”. Another partner said that being patient was important during post-deployment. She expressed the following as a strength of hers: “understanding that my spouse may not want to share everything but letting him know he can”. Partners also mentioned that showing their service member they cared and were devoted was something they saw as a strength in themselves. For example, one participant said that she “tried to show him how much I missed him and loved him and cared about him by doing little things, like packing his lunch and slipping love notes into them”. Of note, one participant, a partner, cited a history of combat deployments as a strength. She said the following, “I think having an intense combat deployment in our history has allowed us to become more resilient together.”

### Challenges: Family roles and personal growth. Some of the biggest challenges in post-deployment were balancing roles, adjusting to personal growth and changes, and the time it takes for the service member to adjust to home life. In discussing balancing multiple roles one dual military service member said “rebalancing both or our works and reestablishing both of our units projected operations to schedule a balance live (sic) at work and at home”. “Refamiliarizing” oneself with the family and the day-to-day roles of living at home was a major challenge cited by both service members and partners. Similarly, one partner described “time” as being the biggest challenge because “time doesn’t stand still for my husband while he is deployed”. Time, refamiliarizing, and personal growth are all encapsulated in the following quote from one partner, “[a challenge is] The slow process of my husband becoming an active parent, my husband becoming an active spouse once again.”

Another frequently cited barrier was the personal growth and change that takes place in both the service member and the partner during a deployment. Said one partner, “I think that even if a deployment is considered easy...it’s always an adjustment process upon return”. She continued to say that for herself, she craved more alone time and had to get used to her service member “being around” and wanting to spend time together. “I was not used to having someone else home with me everyday after I got off work.” A quote that encapsulates the service member perspective of change and post-deployment comes from one service member saying, “I had a different personality each time I returned from combat and was on edge for weeks.”

Participants also wrote about the experience of having to get to know each other again with one partner saying, “one of the hardest parts of coming back together after a deployment was feeling a little like strangers.” She continued to say, “Each time he would deploy and come home we had to become familiar with each other again.”

### Family Beliefs/Practices: Rhythms, equality, time. Service members gave minimal information about family beliefs and practices that were important to themselves. The responses are as follows: “patients (sic) and getting back into a rhythm; “not discussing my experiences”; and having shared goals and priorities. For service members, their understanding of family beliefs seemed to focus on behaviors that the couple did together or a shared mindset they were both able to focus on.

Partners answered this question with more depth and elaboration. One answer that was shared between the two groups was the idea of “getting back into a rhythm” which is how one service member described it. One partner spoke of the necessity of getting “back into a normal routine any time we reintegrate.” One partner also mentioned sustaining pre- and post-deployment rituals as being important for their family: “Having a dinner at a particular restaurant before he leaves and going to the same restaurant when he gets back. Going to extracurricular activities as a family.” One participant explained how equality and coming to an agreement about roles was a family belief that was important for them. “I value being treated like an equal in a relationship, and think both partners should contribute equally to household duties...we were able to come to an agreement around splitting chores and taking turns cooking.” She also wrote that this division of labor helped the service member feel cared for and loved because it meant she would prepare dinner on certain nights when he returned home from work. Dedicating and setting aside time for the relationship was also mentioned by both partners and service members as something they viewed as important and something their partners viewed as important. One partner, speaking of her husband wrote, “he mentioned a few times how nice it was to go on a date or just hang out at home when he returned.”

### Social Support: Church, peers, family. Several participants, both service member and partner, mentioned church and peers who understand them as a source of support. One partner described church support as, “my husband and I are devout Christians (Lutherans) and we reached out to our church community as well as friends around the world for support and prayer.” Female partners mentioned family, friends, and activities such as yoga, body building, or girl’s nights out as helpful during the reintegration process. One partner, when describing her family support, wrote “My dad was always a great source of support for me when my husband was deployed.” Interestingly, while several partners mentioned family as sources of support, no male service member mentioned family as being supportive. However, one partner, speaking for her service member mentioned both her own family and his family as a source of support for him. She said that “spending time with my family was important for my husband” and that he “has a great relationship with his parents and would call his mom every weekend”. A second partner stated that her husband “appreciated when my cousins visited with their kids.” It seems that partners are able to identify the ways in which family is a positive impact for service members but the service members in this study did not identify family as a meaningful support. While one participant mentioned their therapist as a “social support”, counseling and other professional resources were most often mentioned as something participants knew of as available resources but not something they personally utilized. Service member answers were rather unilateral in this domain, frequently mentioning co-workers or friends as their only social support. One service member even wrote “none” when asked about forms of social support. This was the same service member who identified as suffering from PTSD and moral injury.

### Communication. This was seen as both a strength and a challenge for couples. Partners found that communication during deployment was important to making the post-deployment process easier. One service member, when discussing how he and his partner decided what to do after deployment said, “we both agreed that my priority was to return to school and obtain my doctorate. We now both work to sustain that priority.” This couple was able to come to a common understanding and shared goal in the relationship through open communication. A lack of adequate communication was seen as a barrier when it was not possible, such as returning from high tempo combat deployments. For example, “My husband is not a big talker, but I am a verbal processor. We struggled a lot when he first came home with trying to remember how best to communicate with each other.” Male service members stated that “not discussing my experiences” was helpful for them when they returned home. Female partners also mentioned that talking to others who were going through similar processes was helpful. Sometimes this included the use of social media to facilitate communication: “I was able to reach out to people in my network and do a lot of research about homecomings, readjustment, military culture, and helping ease a service member back home.” This is similar to male service member statements that talking to other service members was helpful such as, “reconnecting with friends and colleagues”.

# Discussion

The guiding question of this study was: what is the lived experience of the military couple navigating the homecoming process in post-deployment life? The hope was to gain information about both challenging and positive experiences of each member of the couple during re-integration. At a theoretical level this study is unique due to the specific inclusion of questions that asked about strengths with the aim to elicit positive factors of managing a deployment. The intent was to contribute to the growing body of literature surrounding positive aspects of deployment.

**Strengths**

A pattern that was uncovered in our findings was that adaptability, flexibility, and patience were among the most common strengths cited by both service members and their partners. Participants identified these strengths both in themselves and in their partners, regardless of whether the participant was a service member or partner. This is evidence that these traits are likely paramount to successful reintegration as they were important enough to surface in both types of participant responses. Flexibility was also mentioned as a necessary trait for service members specifically. One consideration, which was mentioned explicitly by a participant, is that flexibility is a trait that is seen more often in service members because of the inherent lack of control in their life. This lack of control results from working in the military. Being highly flexible in your everyday life in the military would, by consequence, benefit the post-deployment process as well, as noted by Bryan, Ray-Sannerud, & Heron (2015).

**Challenges**

In terms of challenges, we found the most consistent ones to be learning to re-adjust to roles in the household, adjusting to the personal growth that took place within both the partner and service member during deployment, and the overall time that it takes to adjust to life at home. This is consistent with findings from Knobloch & Theiss (2012) who found problems reconnecting and difficulty communicating to be common sources of difficulty in military couples who are re-integrating. While being a significant challenge, no participants stated that they were unable to re-negotiate roles, which is consistent with other findings that most couples are able to find a new balance in household roles and responsibilities given enough time (Wood, Scarville, & Gravino, 1995). The findings from the current study reveal that common challenges for couples involve making personal changes to routines, habits, and roles within the house. Second, it supports that, as long as military families are given enough time and resources to manage the personal adjustment required, they are very likely to figure out how to re-define roles within the household and successfully adjust to life together again (Faber, Willerton, Clymer, Macdermid, & Weiss, 2008; Knobloch & Theiss 2012).

**Family Beliefs**

When speaking about family beliefs one answer that was shared between the two groups was the idea of getting back into a rhythm. Rituals and habits such as pre- and post-deployment dinner at the same restaurant, or certain extracurriculars were highly valued. The other notable family belief, which was also mentioned as a strength, was the agreement of familial roles and a sense of equity surrounding household responsibilities. With regards to family beliefs this idea of equity was extended to include dedicating certain time to be spent on developing the relationship. Making the relationship its own individual priority was important to the couple’s ability to reconnect. Prior research has supported the idea that having clearly established roles is beneficial to reintegration and that without it military families may experience what is known as boundary ambiguity; a sense of uncertainty about who is in and out of the family and who is performing what roles (Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008).

**Supports**

When asked about support resources that the participants utilized we found that participants often mentioned church or peers as a resource. Interestingly, participants did not mention the utilization of any professional resources such as DoD sponsored programs, therapists, or counselors. One participant mentioned knowing that these resources existed but did not endorse utilizing them. This is consistent with the findings from other studies that indicate service members and their families often turn to peers for support (Hosek, 2006). Another theory that has been posited is that, as military partners mature, they rely less on formal resources for coping and are more likely to utilize personal relationships. This maturity has not been found to be linked to total number of experienced deployments, but rather other factors tied to maturity such as age and general life experience (Wood, Scarville, and Gavino, 1995). Lastly, other reasons for not seeking professional help have been cited in the literature such as difficulty getting time off of work, appointment availability, cost of treatment, and stigma related to mental health (De Burgh, White, Fear, & Iversen, 2011).

**Other Observations**

The length of responses given in the survey ranged from one word to a few sentences. Some of these one-word responses, while short, still merit discussion. First, when asked about strengths, one service member mentioned his “self-restraint” as a strength. The phrase self-restraint was the entirety of his response. He did not give any further elaboration, so it is difficult to know what he meant by this. One interpretation is that he may be referring to his ability to hold back negative emotions or to compartmentalize in order to avoid negative interactions with his partner.

Second, when discussing social supports, service members did not mention family in any way. Contrastingly, partners mentioned family as a support both for themselves and their service members. This raises questions about the perceived importance of family and how it differs between service members and their partners. It is difficult to glean much information from this study’s limited sample of service members; however, future studies would be advised to ask participants about how they perceive the importance of family in their ability to reintegrate.

Lastly, a statement from one female partner indicated that she believed that the experience of completing a combat deployment was a benefit to the relationship she had with her husband. She made reference to the belief that it helped them become stronger and more confidant in their relationship because of the fact that they were able to endure a challenging experience like combat deployment. This statement is a summation of one of the purposes of this study; to shed light on the ways in which successfully navigating military stressors can be a positive experience for military couples.

## Limitations and Weaknesses

One unexpected limitation of the current study was the general paucity in depth and detail of service member responses. In general, service member responses were shorter and involved little elaboration. This made it difficult to gather detailed information about service member experiences. Partners, however, provided answers with more richness and detail. The implications of this disparity in response style is that, with all things being equal, service member responses may provide less information and less insight than do partner responses. It is possible that the way in which questions were phrased made service members less inclined to provide detailed responses. Several participants did respond to questions with answers such as, “I’m not sure what you mean.” It is possible that the questions could have been written to more accurately tap in to the ways in which service members conceptualize their experiences of re-integration. For example, several participants gave identical answers for both family beliefs/practices and social supports, while other participants wrote “see above” or “see below”. It seems that a subsection of the participants interpreted these two categories to be similar in some way. Future studies may want to consider trying to recruit a higher number of service members to counteract their tendency for sparse responses.

One weakness of this study was the low number of participants who were eligible for inclusion. Initially participants had to have experienced a deployment two years prior to the time of taking the survey. As a result of low participant turn-out, midway through data collection the inclusion criteria was adjusted to allow eligibility for any couples with a deployment since September 11, 2001. This was because of inherent difficulties in finding couples who had experienced a deployment within the past two years at the time of data collection. This process did extend the time frame in which data collection occurred in order to allow for sufficient time to attempt to reach a saturation of themes. While saturation of themes was not reached, by July 2018 new participants were no longer entering the study and it was decided that data collection should be halted. While this lack of saturation does bring in to question the generalizability of the current studies findings, as noted in this discussion, these findings are consistent with what has been found in prior literature. In general, it was more difficult to find service members to participate in the study when compared to partners of service members. Overall, recruiting military personnel and their families into studies appears to be a challenge. Military families lead busy lives with many responsibilities, as we have seen throughout this study, and asking for their time to complete surveys has proved more challenging than initially anticipated.

## Conclusion

The aim of this study was to better understand the challenges and the successes that military couples experienced after a deployment. In attempting to do so the researchers wanted to better understand, what the lived experience was of military couples navigating the homecoming process in post-deployment life? The information gathered in this study helped to reveal what kinds of strengths service members and their partners possessed and how these strengths aided them in navigating post deployment. We also gained valuable information about the challenges they faced and what kind of supports military couples found helpful in dealing with those challenges. Lessons were learned about the difficulty in acquiring participants who are involved in the military. Despite a low number of participants this study managed to glean valuable information from participants by utilizing a qualitative approach that encouraged participants to be the forerunners in how their voices were portrayed in this study. In sum both service members and partners of service members shared commonalities in their identified strengths, barriers, and supports during post-deployment. Common strengths across participants include adaptability and flexibility, both in themselves and their partners. A common barrier was having to adapt to changes in one’s partner following a deployment. The most commonly cited support system was peers and in-group individuals. Differences between participants existed in the utilization or lack-there-of of family as a source of support. In addition, service members did not identify activities, hobbies, or use of social media as a form of support whereas partner’s mentioned all three of these supports.

Family beliefs that were important to both types of respondents included having shared household responsibilities and being able to spend time together to reconnect as a couple. Social supports were the responses that differed most between respondents. Partners mentioned both family and peers who can relate to them as important sources of support. Service members stated that peers, particularly other service members, were their most important source of social support. There was no mention of family or familial relationships by service members when asked about social supports. Lastly, one respondent mentioned professional services as a known support but not something they had personally utilized. In terms of clinical implications of these findings, it is important to remember that military couples may wish to utilize supports that lie outside of professional organizations or resources. Given the tendency to report supports as family, friends, and church groups, it is likely that the most effective forms of outreach would be from a community-based, bottom up approach, as opposed to an organization-led, top down approach. When considering how professional resources could utilize this information, it is worth noting the lack of recognized family support by service members. This lack of perceived family support may be indicative of how service members view who can and cannot help them adjust to civilian life. Those engaging with military couples in a professional capacity would be benefit from being mindful of this possible disparity in perceived support systems. The most important finding of this study is the reinforcement that service members and their civilian partners both *experience* a deployment, and the ways in which they manage the post-deployment life and the ways in which they attempt to reconnect with their partners may differ within a couple.

When looking at future directions for this line of scientific inquiry, it can be worthwhile to understand how the researcher’s relationship to a military population can impact the data collection process. It might be beneficial for researchers interested in using military couples as participants, to have a positive relationship with the military community or military organizations. This kind of relationship can be helpful in securing more participants because the researchers can be viewed as part of the in-group of their population of interest.

The data gathered in this study can be useful to several different groups of people. First, civilian psychologists, social workers, and other groups who interact with military couples would benefit from a more thorough understanding of the military couple experience. Within military organizations, various family support entities would benefit from having up-to-date research on the current challenges faced by the couples and families they serve. Command structures within the military may also benefit from understanding couple relationships during post-deployment because it can help them develop post-deployment procedures and schedules that will benefit couples rather than detract from the coming home process. At a broader level, policy and administrative rules regarding deployment tempos and military family relocation policies can both be informed by research that focuses on military couples and their experiences after deployment. Lastly, it is paramount to recognize that deployments are not wholly negative experiences and can have positive benefits for a couple that is able to navigate the stressors and feel like they were able to grow from the process.

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| **Appendix A**  Table 1 | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Characteristics of Participants | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Age, y | Participant Type | Gender | Branch | Service Member Years of Service | Grade and Rank | Most recent deployment | Total Deployments | Combat Exposure | Length of Relationship, y | Length of Cohabitation, y | No. of Children |
| 34 | SM | M | USAF | 12 | O-4 Major | Feb – Dec 2017 | 3 | Indirect fire | 16 | 8 | 2 |
| 30 | P | F | USMC | 10.5 | E6 SSgt | Dec 2016-June 2017 | 3 | unknown | 9 | 9 | 0 |
| 30 | P | F | Army | 14 | W2 Chief Warrant Officer | Mar – Oct 2014 | 2 | Yes | 11+ | 10 | 3 |
| 28 | P | F | Army | 15 | E7 Sgt First Class | 2011 | 7 | Yes | 10 | 9 | 0 |
| 32 | SM | M | Army | 15 | E7 Sgt First Class | 2011 | 7 | Yes | 11 | 7 | 0 |
| 35 | P | F | USAF | 17 | E7 MSgt | Sep 2011 -Present | 6 | Unknown | 15 | 14 | 0 |
| 37 | SM | M | Army Natnl Guard | 10 | O4 Capt | Jun 2015-Apr 2016 | 1 | No | 5 | 5 | 0 |
| 26 | P | F | Navy | 4 | E5 Petty Officer Second Class | Jan -July 2017 | 2 | No | 8 | 5.5 | 0 |
| Note. SM= service member; P=partner | | | | | | | | | | | |

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| Table 2 |
| Survey Questions |
| Demographic Questions |
| Are you a service member in the United States Armed Forces or a partner of a service member? |
| How long have you and your partner been in a romantic relationship together? |
| Are you married? If so, for how long? |
| What branch of service are you or your partner a member of? |
| How many years has you or your partner been in service? |
| What is your age? Gender? What is you or your partners grade and rank? |
| Date range of most recent deployment? |
| How many total times have you or your partner been deployed? |
| To the extent that you know, did you or your partner experience any combat during the most recent deployment? |
| Do you have any children? |
| Research Questions |
| What strengths did you bring to the re-integration process? |
| What strengths did your partner bring to the re-integration process? |
| What barriers or challenges did you and your partner experience during the coming home process? |
| What family beliefs and/or practices were important in the re-integration process for you? |
| What family beliefs and/or practices were important in the re-integration process for your partner? |
| What kind of, if any, social support was relevant for you during re-integration? Social support can be structured (book clubs, church groups, etc) or unstructured (meeting friends for coffee, etc)? |
| What kind of, if any, social support was relevant for your partner during re-integration? Social support can be structured (book clubs, church groups, etc) or unstructured (meeting friends for coffee, etc)? |
| Is there any other information you would like for us to know? |