

The Implications of Attachment Theory for Military Wives: Effects During a Post-Deployment Period



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Kristin A. Vincenzes
Laura Haddock
Gregory Hickman

Past research has indicated the negative and positive impacts of deployment on military wives. Furthermore, research has indicated the need to further understand the different deployment stages, specifically the post-deployment period. The authors examined Bowlby's and Ainsworth's attachment theories, specifically separation anxiety occurrence as experienced by stay-behind wives during their husbands' post-deployment period. Purposive/volunteer sampling was used to survey 57 military wives currently experiencing the post-deployment period. A linear regression analysis produced a significant positive relationship between duration of deployment and the wife's psychological distress during the post-deployment period. As deployments increased in duration, specifically to longer than 6 months, the levels of psychological distress significantly increased. Implications for counselors and researchers are addressed.

Keywords: post-deployment, attachment, military wives, separation anxiety, deployment

Between 2001 and 2012, the U.S. government sent 2.4 million soldiers to Iraq and Afghanistan (U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs, 2012). According to Demers (2008), deployments affected both the soldier and the stay-behind wife (over 56% of the soldiers reported being married according to the Department of Defense, 2012). The couple's relationship may play an intricate role in identifying effects that a deployment could have on a stay-behind wife. Specifically, stay-behind wives may have both positive and negative experiences in response to prolonged separation from their husbands (Barker & Berry, 2009; Demers, 2008; Morse, 2006).

This study focuses specifically on wives of male soldiers, and applies Bowlby's and Ainsworth's attachment theories (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970; Bowlby, 1969) to military wives' post-deployment experiences. Bowlby (1969) asserted that an accumulation of early attachment experiences create expectations for future relationships. Over 40 years ago, Ainsworth and Bell (1970) identified three primary types of attachment: secure, avoidant and ambivalent. More specifically, the researchers found that children with an ambivalent attachment style exhibited anxiety following separation when the mother returned, going near the mother, but also exhibiting signs of anger by pushing her away (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). In comparison, children with a secure attachment welcomed their mother's return, and children with an avoidant attachment showed little interest in their returning mother (Ainsworth & Bell, 1970). Robertson and Bowlby (1952) also examined the idea of separation anxiety, identifying specific infant stages of attachment. The three phases an infant goes through when separated from their mother include protest, despair, and denial or detachment (Robertson & Bowlby, 1952).

The three separation anxiety phases may be applied to attachment issues that military wives experience dur-

Kristin A. Vincenzes, NCC, is an Assistant Professor and Director of the Clinical Mental Health Counseling program at Lock Haven University. Laura Haddock, NCC, is a Core Faculty member and CES Program Coordinator at Walden University. Gregory Hickman is a Core Faculty member at Walden University. Correspondence can be addressed to Kristin A. Vincenzes, 401 N. Fairview Street, Courthouse Annex Room 301, Lock Haven, PA, 17745, KAV813@lhup.edu.

ing and after their husbands' out-of-country deployment (Basham, 2008; Riggs & Riggs, 2011). The first phase, protest, occurs when a child is separated from his or her mother, with sadness and anxiety presenting as the most common initial emotional reactions. The protest phase is linked to pre-deployment and deployment time periods, as wives often feel numb, angry and abandoned due to an upcoming or current separation from their husbands (Pincus, House, Christenson, & Adler, 2001). Furthermore, wives also may experience sadness, loneliness and anxiety during this phase (SteelFisher, Zaslavsky, & Blendon, 2008).

The second phase of separation anxiety is despair, characterized by feelings of extreme sadness (Riggs & Riggs, 2011; Robertson & Bowlby, 1952). A wife may often go through similar stages of grief and mourning when her husband is deployed (Pincus et al., 2001). Initially a wife may be in denial that her husband is gone, believing that she will be fine and that he is only away for a few days' training (Pincus et al., 2001). As time passes, she may experience depression and withdrawal as she realizes that her husband will not return for a long time, if at all (Vormbrock, 1993).

The nature of the military deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan are characterized by continual life-threatening experiences, coupled with the absence of any "safe" place (Demers, 2008). Constant media coverage spotlights the dangers of deployment to active combat zones and undoubtedly impacts a wife's ability to trust that her husband will safely return (Demers, 2008). Wives have reported being in constant fear for their soldiers' safety, which may result in feeling helpless throughout the deployment (Demers, 2008; Spera, 2009). Eventually, a wife may begin to accept that her husband is gone, and transfer her love to someone else, such as a child or different partner (Morse, 2006).

The final phase of separation anxiety, denial or detachment, can occur during both the deployment period and the post-deployment period (Morse, 2006). Robertson and Bowlby (1952) postulated that this last phase serves as a defense mechanism, which wives utilize when their husbands abruptly rejoin their families (Pincus et al., 2001; Riggs & Riggs, 2011). Anxiety combined with excitement has been found to impact the restabilization of the couple (Morse, 2006; Pincus et al., 2001). Attempting to regain a physical and emotional connection with one another after a long, seemingly permanent separation has been found to be extremely stressful, resulting in struggles with communication, coparenting, returning to pre-deployment routines, and marital intimacy (Orthner & Rose, 2005).

Additional challenges during the post-deployment period may entail negotiating new roles and boundaries within the family system, household management, financial status, parental rejection and new social supports (Drummet, Coleman, & Cable, 2003). If the husband returns and attempts to resume roles that existed prior to his deployment, it may diminish the stay-behind wife's feelings of worth and accomplishment, since she successfully managed the various facets of daily life in her husband's absence (Drummet et al., 2003), further straining the attachment between the couple. Although each endured the deployment simultaneously, the experiences were likely uniquely and vastly different from one another (Pincus et al., 2001).

Purpose

This quantitative study examined how stay-behind wives experience separation anxiety, through examining the relationship between duration of deployment and psychological distress during post-deployment. The theoretical framework for this study focused on attachment between a husband and wife and how a couple cope with separation. Surveys of wives were conducted during the post-deployment period in an effort to capture data from the time that couples were reattaching. For the purposes of this study, post-deployment is defined as the 12-month period after the husband has returned from deployment.

Research Design

A nonexperimental, correlational design was chosen for this study. In order to gain access to a multitude of military wives, there was no specific inclusion criteria with regard to the soldier's branch in the military, rank, or if the husband was active duty, Reserves, or National Guard. In order to attempt to control for the potential confounding variable of gender, this study included only stay-behind wives. Stay-behind wives may or may not have children. Finally, stay-behind wives must currently be in the post-deployment stage; therefore, the husbands must have returned from their deployment within the past 12 months (Vincenzen, 2013).

Data Collection

The sampling method used for this research was volunteer purposive sampling. Inclusion criteria included the following: female, currently married and experiencing the post-deployment period (within the 12 months since her husband returned from the deployment), and a deployment that had lasted 6 or more months. Approximately 30 original e-mails were sent out to military advocacy groups, current military wives, the Army Wives Network, and a military advocacy group called Pennsylvania Americans showing Compassion, Assistance, and Reaching out with Empathy for Service members (PA C.A.R.E.S.). These individuals were asked to forward the initial e-mail soliciting military wives for the current study (Vincenzen, 2013).

If individuals agreed to volunteer for the study, they immediately received a background questionnaire, which assessed the duration of deployment (independent variable). Duration of deployment was operationalized as the total number of months that the soldier was deployed, from the day he left until the day he returned (Vincenzen, 2013). Furthermore, the participants took the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS-21; Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995), which was used to operationally define the dependent variable of psychological distress. The DASS-21 is a 21-item Likert scale survey and consists of three subscales (Depression, Anxiety, and Stress). In addition to individual scores on the subscales, the assessment provides an overall global psychological distress level, which was the score this particular study used. The reliability for this measure was high with a .93 internal consistency on the overall global scale (Henry & Crawford, 2005). In addition, the DASS-21 illustrated good convergent and discriminant validity as compared to the Hospital Anxiety and Depression Scale and Personal Disturbance Scale (Henry & Crawford, 2005).

Results

Of the 145 participants who responded to the survey, 48.9% ($n = 68$) met the criteria, but 14.7% ($n = 10$) had missing data. Thus, the final data sample contained 40% ($n = 58$) of the participants who volunteered. The inclusive sample accurately depicted the dispersion of active duty military (56.9% Army, 22.4% Air Force, 12.1% Navy, and 1.4% Marine Corps); however, fewer participants were associated with the National Guard (5.2%) and Reserves (1.7%) than expected.

The age of the wives ranged from 21–47 ($M = 31.2$, $SD = 6.7$), and 50% were 29 years old or younger. The majority of the participants (93.1 %) had some years of college (only 6.9% had a high school diploma/GED or less). Furthermore, 29.3% had some college, but no degree; 20.7% had an associate degree, 31% had a bachelor's degree, and 12.1% had a graduate degree. With regard to employment status, 53.4% of the participants were not employed and 46.6% were employed. The number of years couples were married ranged from 1–20 ($M = 7.2$, $SD = 5$) and 48.3% of the participants had been married 5 years or less. The number of children under 17 who lived in the household ranged from 0–4 ($M = 1.5$, $SD = 1.3$) and 51.7% had either no children or one child. The length of deployments ranged from 6–16 months ($M = 9.5$, $SD = 2.8$). Finally, the length of time since the husband returned from deployment ranged from 0–12 months ($M = 6.0$, $SD = 4.2$).

The study's null hypothesis stated that in the population under investigation, the proportion of variance in post-deployment psychological distress level explained by the duration of deployment (as measured by the DASS-21) was zero. Linear regression analysis predicted psychological distress from the duration of husband's deployment. Results from the analysis indicated that duration of deployment significantly predicted psychological distress: $F(1, 57) = 5.384$, $p = .024$, $R = .296$, $\text{Adj. } R^2 = .071$. Duration of deployment accounted for 8.8% of the variance in psychological distress and was positively related to psychological distress ($\beta = .296$, $sr^2 = .088$). Based on these results, the null hypothesis, which stated that distress levels would be zero or not change following longer deployments, was rejected. Thus, as the duration of deployment increases, the psychological distress levels for stay-behind wives also increases.

Discussion

This study confirmed prior research and extended existing literature regarding attachment theory as it relates to stay-behind military wives. For example, researchers have found that when husbands are deployed or away on military duties for several months, the wives not only demonstrate feelings of anger during the deployments, but that their feelings of anger persist even after their husbands return from deployment and military duties (Pincus et al., 2001; Riggs & Riggs, 2011; Zeff, Lewis, & Hirsch, 1997). Indeed, the findings from this current study supported prior research, as the author found a positive relationship between deployments of increasing length and an increase in distress levels among stay-behind military wives. Although this study did not specifically evaluate wives' anger, other researchers have found that high distress levels are correlated with the development of anger among military wives (Drummet et al., 2003).

The results of this study illustrate that post-deployment is indeed very stressful for the wife, particularly when the husband was deployed for 6 months or more. Since deployments lasting 6 or more months significantly predicted psychological distress for the wives, it may be that as deployment length increases, stress levels also may increase, resulting in a wife emotionally withdrawing from her husband. The findings from this study support prior research that has identified the coping strategy of emotional withdrawal, which results from psychological distress and may enable the wife to continue her daily life, while also creating a new support system and sense of emotional equilibrium (Pincus et al., 2001).

Some stay-behind wives function well on a daily basis while their husbands are deployed; however, other stay-behind wives appear to struggle with their husbands' deployment (Riggs & Riggs, 2011). Such research supports the notion that wives who made secure attachments while growing up may be better able to cope with military separations (Riggs & Riggs, 2011). It should be noted, however, that only in the past several years have some deployments lasted up to 15 or 16 months (Sheppard, Malatras, & Israel, 2010). The length of deployments, especially 6 or more months, may significantly alter the ability of stay-behind wives to successfully cope, regardless of their attachment styles. Further research should examine the impact of lengthy deployments (e.g., 6 or more months) on stay-behind wives' ability to cope as it relates to attachment style, as there may be a point of diminishing returns at which, regardless of one's attachment to her parents growing up, the ability to cope disappears.

Vormbrock (1993) predicted that as the duration of deployment increased, so too would distress levels during the couple's reunion. This was hypothesized to be due to the continual unavailability of the attachment figure. The current study supports Vormbrock's theory in that participants' reported distress levels during post-deployment were significantly higher ($p = .023$) as deployment duration increased. Perhaps when the husband is gone for 6 months or more, the potential for the marriage to grow apart or detach may increase. Vormbrock (1993) found that wives can successfully focus on the brevity of their separation as a means of coping; however, as the deployments increase in length, it may affect wives' ability to maintain the mentality that this separation is only

temporary. Deployments that require the couple to be apart for 6 or more months may result in the wife feeling that the separation is more permanent. The longer the husband is away, the more independent the wife may become by creating new schedules and ways of doing things (Morse, 2006; Pincus et al., 2001).

Although this research elaborated on the relationship of the post-deployment period and distress among stay-behind military wives, there are some limitations to the study. The first limitation may be a self-selection bias, which may have impacted the internal validity. More specifically, since participants were volunteers, some individuals may have extremely negative feelings toward the military and may have opted not to participate. This could have inadvertently skewed the population sample, thus impacting the results. Indeed, researchers have discussed that volunteer samples may have biased tendencies as a motivation for their participation in a specific study (Frankfort-Nachmias & Nachmias, 2008). In addition to self-selection bias, an instrumentation threat could be present, as this survey relied on participants' honesty. Another possible limitation is that this study was a regression study, which relies on the correlational nature of two variables. Perhaps there are extraneous variables that could be moderating or mediating the relationship of deployment length and distress level among stay-behind military wives.

Conclusions and Implications

Despite existing limitations, this study supported research regarding military deployment as a significant concern for military families, as well as for military leaders who rely on the husbands of these stay-behind wives to provide national security. As surveys within the last decade indicate that nearly 60% of American military members are married (Sierra & Kemp, n.d.), the results of this study also offer further insight into the contextual factors that are part of a therapeutic treatment intervention. Military couples are unique and a counselor's awareness of needs particular to this group is imperative for therapeutic success.

The current research found a positive correlation between the duration of deployment and stay-behind wives' psychological distress levels during post-deployment. This finding corroborates the research on separation anxiety for children, particularly when children illustrate signs of detachment from their mother following a separation. Attachment figures may include other vital individuals in one's life, especially for military couples. Since many military couples do not live close to immediate biological family members, the wife may solely depend on the husband to meet her emotional, physical and social needs, just as an infant child often relies on their mother to meet these same basic needs. With this in mind, the notion of separation anxiety may not be just applicable to young children but also adults, particularly military wives.

Counselors may want to educate stay-behind wives on separation anxiety and assist them in processing their experiences, as well as recognize wives' desire for a stable, secure relationship and assist them to this end. Furthermore, since deployments are unpredictable and out of the wives' control, it may be helpful for counselors to assist the wives in gaining a greater sense of control throughout their daily lives. Just as counselors often recommend that children with separation anxiety have a consistent routine, as well as partake in positive social activities, it also may be helpful to encourage stay-behind wives to create predictable routines that include engaging in various social events with friends and/or other military wives.

This study also has implications for further research regarding the human services industry (e.g., clergy, educators) who directly work with such military families. One might assume that not all soldiers or their wives experience deployment the same way, and thus counselors must be prepared to individualize interventions and compose treatment plans according to the needs of the individual as well as needs as a couple. For example, the post-deployment period may entail negotiating new roles and boundaries within the family system. Wives frequently experience the emotion of celebration for the return of their husbands, while also feeling confusion over

what it will mean to share a home again after becoming more independent. This experience of boundary ambiguity can be very confusing for wives who recognize that their husbands are physically present, but who are still transitioning toward psychological acceptance that he is present.

Role ambiguity may increase if the couple is not comfortable communicating with each other regarding roles, responsibilities and needs. Simultaneously, a soldier may feel disconnected and unaware of how to reengage without interfering with the family's new roles. Thus, helping professionals must be prepared to work with the couple on strengthening basic communication skills and nurturing a climate that facilitates safe and transparent information exchange.

Future research could evaluate the experiences of deployed husbands in terms of understanding how the distress level of their stay-behind wives impacts their duties while deployed. Such research might have national security implications. In addition, future research could examine deployments of 6 months or more regarding the struggles, challenges, resiliency, social and psychological effects, educational outcomes, parenting styles, and attachment of the deployed husbands, the stay-behind wives, and their children.

One particular variable that may moderate the relationship between duration of deployment and psychological distress is the stay-behind wife's social support system. Larsen and Kia-Keating (2010) found that a social support system significantly aided resiliency for stay-behind wives who experienced a military deployment. Furthermore, a wife's well-being was positively impacted by having a mentor who had previously experienced a deployment herself (Larsen & Kia-Keating, 2010). This brings up an interesting perception of what social support may be necessary for a military wife. Whereas some social support indices examine tangible support (i.e., someone to help around the house), the stay-behind wife may need a social support that relies more on reducing emotional stress.

Future research could qualitatively explore the social support construct further by interviewing stay-behind wives and identifying the indices of social support that they deem important in terms of reducing stress during the post-deployment period. Such a qualitative process could then lead to the quantitative development of a more valid measure of social support necessary to reduce stress for stay-behind military wives, and therefore indirectly for their deployed husbands. Perhaps such a study could examine whether social support serves as a moderating or mediating influence on the relationship between deployment length and psychological distress of stay-behind wives. Such research could have both positive and negative implications for their families, the military, and society at large, as American society depends greatly on its military for national security.

Conflict of Interest and Funding Disclosure

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