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# Deployment Issues for Women Veterans and their Children

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# Deployment Issues for Women Veterans and their Children

by

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MSW Clinical Research Paper

Presented to the Faculty of the  
School of Social Work  
St. Catherine University and the University of St. Thomas  
St. Paul, Minnesota  
In Partial fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Social Work

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The Clinical Research Project is a graduation requirement for MSW students at St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas School of Social Work in St. Paul, Minnesota and is conducted within a nine-month time frame to demonstrate facility with basic research methods. Students must independently conceptualize a research problem, formulate a research design that is approved by a research committee and the university Institutional Review Board, implement the project, and publicly present the findings of the study. This project is neither a Master's thesis nor a dissertation.

### **Abstract**

Deployment creates unique experiences and issues for women veterans and their children. Although each family has their own understanding of deployment, examining common issues throughout families may inform future practice with military families. For this research the deployment issues that are present for women veterans and their children were examined. A secondary data analysis analyzed eight participants (n=8) and their children who had discussions regarding non-deployment and deployment issues in addition to completing problem solving tasks. This study found that deployment issues for these families were sadness about the deployed parent being gone, talking about deployment, communicating during deployment, missing birthdays during deployment, the concern of a parent being injured or killed during deployment and the parent needing space upon returning from deployment. A theme found was the presence of emotions surrounding deployment despite the unique issues that were encountered for each family. This information can allow social workers to provide better informed treatment for military families and promote increased development of mental health services for veterans and their children.

### **Acknowledgements**

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### **Introduction**

On September 11, 2001 the United States experienced possibly one the most frightening and unexpected terrorist attacks in our nation's history. This event resulted in an increased number of soldiers from the United States being deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan. The conflicts in Afghanistan (Operation Enduring Freedom; OEF) and Iraq (Operation Iraqi Freedom; OIF) resulted in the highest rates of military troop mobilization and deployment since the Vietnam War (Gewirtz, Polusney, DeGarmo, Khaylis & Erbes, 2010).

To date, a total of over 2.1 million American men and women in uniform have deployed in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) (Gewirtz, Polusney, DeGarmo, Khaylis & Erbes, 2010). Of those Service members, approximately 100,000 — 44 % — are parents. When examining all deployed Service members with children, 48 percent have served at least two tours in Iraq or Afghanistan (Military One Source, 2013). The current conflicts have resulted in the most U.S. military families affected by deployment-related family separation, combat injury, and death since the Vietnam War (Gewirtz, Polusney, DeGarmo, Khaylis & Erbes, 2010). This kind of combat deployment is particularly stressful for National Guard and Reserve “civilian soldiers,” who tend to be older, partnered with dependent children and less prepared for prolonged separation from family than active duty service members (Gewirtz, Polusney, DeGarmo, Khaylis & Erbes, 2010).

In addition to the reliance on National Guard and Reserve Troops, a large number of soldiers deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan have been parents. The large number of veterans that are parents has resulted in a push to examine the impacts of deployment on parenting. Also, according to the United States Department of Veteran Affairs, in 2013 the United States population of women veterans of all wars is over two million. Approximately 12 %, or 240,000, of veterans that have served in OIF/ OEF are women (Department of Veterans Affairs, 2013).

The increasing number of women veterans, in addition to nearly half of veterans being parents, further suggests that an examination on the impacts that deployment has on deployed mothers and children of military veterans was necessary.

### **Relevance to Social Work**

There are many stressful effects that deployment has on women veterans and their children which are discussed in the literature review. Coping with these pressures may require professional assistance for these families before, during and after deployment. Social workers are a valuable resource for veterans and their families in times of need. Social workers have the ability to provide mental health services or other forms of support for women veterans and their children. Although social workers are trained to provide assistance; further research, training and resources must be available in order for social workers to be able to practice effectively with those that have been impacted by deployment.

Social workers are the largest group of clinically trained mental health providers in the United States (National Association of Social Workers, 2012). The considerable population of social workers within the mental health field indicates a large probability that social workers will be serving both military veterans and their families. The high likelihood that social workers will work with this population is a cause for training these professionals to military veterans and their families.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to examine issues regarding deployment for women veterans and their children post deployment. Data was analyzed using a secondary data analysis from a parenting study at a large Mid-western University. The larger study examined a parenting intervention for families which have had a parent deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan. The goal of

the current study was to assess common issues related to a mother's deployment. Recognizing these common issues can assist social workers and other mental health practitioners in working with military veterans and their children.



### **Literature Review**

A review of the literature regarding the service member's experiences with deployment to Iraq or Afghanistan will explore the impacts that deployment has on women veterans and their families. First, a review on the effects of deployment for all veterans will be explored. Second, an examination of the literature will discuss the effects of deployment on children and families that are left behind. Finally, literature that is specific to women veterans and their children is discussed. Due to a lack of literature specific to women veterans, much of the literature review will discuss deployment for all service members.

### **Scope of the Problem**

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have caused a large increase in American service members being deployed overseas to fight for freedom. As previously mentioned, a total of over 2.1 million American men and women in uniform have deployed to support operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) (Department of Defense, 2010). While considering the great number of service members that have been deployed, it is also important to remember the families of service members that are also impacted by these wars. Taking family members and friends into consideration, the number of people affected by overseas deployment is perhaps immeasurable.

Not since the Vietnam War have so many U.S. military families been affected by deployment- related family separation, combat injury, and death (Department of Defense, 2010). It is important to recognize that those suffering from these deployment related hardships are often children and within their corresponding families. There are a total of 1.8 million children (Active Duty: 1,175,055; Reserve Component: 650,549) of the U. S. military personnel (Department of Defense, 2010). Many young children from military families have never known

a life without the possibility of a parent being deployed. Three out of five service members deployed around the world to support OEF and OIF leave families at home (Riggs & Riggs, 2007). Being aware of the numbers of Americans influenced by deployment, and the research available around these events, is imperative for better serving this population.

### **Family Structure**

When a parent is deployed overseas it has a great influence on the family that is left behind. Military families have been described as accordion families in that they must frequently adjust to the departure and return of one (or sometimes two) family members- retracting and expanding to accommodate the presence and absence of a deployed parent (Paley, Lester & Mogil, 2013). Coping with frequent departure and return creates stressful transitions and role adjustment for every family member. This is especially difficult when a family faces successive deployments within 9-12 months of a parent's return. In addition, military families have had to prepare for such deployments with very brief notice and uncertainty when a deployment would end. Further complicating the experience for some families has been the requirement to extend deployments beyond the typical period anticipated by each service branch (Paley, Lester & Mogil, 2013). The stress of one or both parents returning and leaving multiple times can cause tension for each individual involved.

Each family has its own experience with deployment, but there are some stressors that seem to be consistent across most military families. These stressors include frequent relocations and reconfigurations of the family system, ambiguous loss and fear for a loved one's safety, and high levels of stress and/or dysfunction among family members (Riggs & Riggs, 2007). Each of these struggles also comes with a range of emotions. Andres and Moelker (2010) discuss the well-known emotional cycle of deployment, which describes feelings of sadness and loss during

the first weeks of the separation followed by family members stabilizing and settling into a certain routine. Coping is another factor that varies between each family system. Some families are able to recognize and adapt to these events relatively smoothly, whereas others may have a harder time responding when the family's typical way of functioning is disrupted (Paley, Lester & Mogil, 2013). Although each family varies, military families as an overall group are extremely resilient and possess many coping skills to manage the stressors involved with deployment.

There are some patterns present which positively impact resilience and family outcomes related to deployment. Riggs & Riggs (2007) note that stressful experiences impact the entire family but these impacts on members and relationships are mediated by key family processes. These processes include family belief systems, communication processes, and organizational patterns (Riggs & Riggs, 2007). In addition to these key processes, military families benefit from family resources (economic and social resources in particular), individual attributes, family relationships (including parent child relationships), communication, stability of home routines, and time factors, such as the length of time spent in a single-parent system. (Andres & Moelker, 2010). Each of these characteristics is beneficial to the family while a parent is deployed.

The role of the non-deployed parent is crucial for the well-being of a family during deployment. Positive ways to manage being a single-parent are to maintain psychological well-being, continue providing responsive parenting, and establish new functional family processes in the absence of the military parent (Riggs & Riggs, 2007). It is important for the community and other resources to be available as support systems for non-deployed parents.

### **Community Support for the Family System**

The community that a military family lives in can be a key predictor for positive outcomes (Paley, Lester & Mogil, 2013). Unfortunately, many veterans and their families are not

living in military communities and may not have ready access to mental health providers who are properly trained to meet their needs. Furthermore, services have traditionally been aimed at the service member, and only recently has there been a growing recognition that when service members are deployed, the repercussions of those deployment experiences reverberate throughout the entire family with sometimes lasting detrimental effects (Paley, Lester & Mogil, 2013). Properly trained professionals are able to assist families with preparing for deployment, during deployment, and reintegration.

It is essential that communities are supportive of families of service members. A report by the Department of Defense found that “Family living environment is likely to mitigate the adverse effect of deployment on children. Supportive environments surrounding children, including extended family members, school, neighbors, and local community can mitigate the anxiety and stress of children of deployed service members” (Department of Defense, 2010, p.24). Recognizing the strength and resilience that military families possess, while providing support, are protective factors for those close to veterans.

Military families, like all families, vary in the degree to which they may seek social support, with some feeling more comfortable sharing internal family difficulties with others outside the immediate family (Paley, Lester, Mogil, 2013). Due to the differences in comfort level in seeking community support, adults that are close to military families serve as supplementary resources for the non-deployed family. Caring adults can also provide emotional support to children, compensating for parents whose own emotional reserves have been exceeded, or as an alternative outlet for children who are reluctant to burden their parents with their concerns. (Paley, Lester, Mogil, 2013). Extended family members are key resources for non-deployed parents and children.

**Effects on the Non- Deployed Parent**

Specific effects on the non-deployed parents are additional components that are important to investigate when considering the impacts of deployment on families. For each service member affected, his or her children, partners and spouses are affected as well because of mental health problems which create an atmosphere of sadness, grief, tension, and fear that is absorbed to a lesser or greater degree by all members of the family (Lieberman & Van Horn, 2013). An upset home atmosphere is likely to cause issues within family dynamics and care giving between the non-deployed caregiver and children.

Spouses have reported that deployment results in loss of emotional support, loneliness, role overload, role shifts, and concerns about the safety and well-being of the deployment military member (Lieberman & Van Horn, 2013). In addition to loss of support and role shifts there is concern about the service member's safety. There are substantial difficulties in getting reliable and timely information about the deployed husband or wife (Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, Weiss, 2008). A combination of stressors, along with a lack of information available regarding the service member, creates additional difficulty for non-deployed parents that are tending to the family.

The well-being of the non-deployed parent is not only important on an individual level, but also when considering the welfare of the family as a whole. The Department of Defense found that a non-deployed caregiver or spouse's psychological health is positively associated with children's successful coping with deployment related stress (Department of Defense, 2010). It is assumed that children are responsive to parental stress and will often mirror how parents respond in stressful situations (Andres & Moelker, 2010). In addition to successful coping for children, the mental health of the civilian caregiver is important to consider in regard to the

safety of children. Child maltreatment has been shown to significantly increase when a parent is deployed to a combat related mission (Liebermann & Van Horn, 2013).

### **Effects on Young & School Aged Children**

When a parent, especially a mother, is away from her family due to deployment there are many implications for the children that are left behind. This is particularly concerning for young children that are still forming attachment with parents. The first years of a child's life are important for forming a trusting attachment with caregivers. For young children in military families, parental availability and protectiveness can be strained by extended absences of parents deployed abroad along with the emotions that go along with war experiences (Lieberman & Van Horn, 2013). Concerns surrounding attachment are especially present for children whose parents have fought in Iraq or Afghanistan as multiple deployments have been common for these conflicts. Multiple deployments may contribute to confusion for children and maintain the issues that children have with forming a secure attachment.

A study by Barker and Berry (2009) examined selected attachment issues for young children who had either a mother or father deploy. Fifty- seven families with at least one young child and an active duty soldier completed two surveys at different time points. Some concerns found in the surveys included confusion, questioning where the deployed parent is, and fearing that the deployed parent will never return. These behaviors often continue after the deployed parent returns home. "Problems included: trouble sleeping in own bed, not seeking comfort from returning parent, not wanting returning parent to leave the house, returning parent losing authority as disciplinarian, and preferring non-deployed spouse/caregiver over returning parent" (Barker & Berry, 1038). Clearly, a parent's deployment is challenging and confusing for young children.

When a primary attachment figure leaves, some of a child's usual resources for dealing with stressful circumstances or emotionally distressing events may no longer be available. Children may rely on the at home parent for more comfort and reassurance than usual during the deployed parent's absence. However, the at home parent's own coping abilities may be taxed during deployment, as he/she manages additional household responsibilities while also dealing with their own concerns about the deployed parent (Paley, Lester & Mogil, 2013). Thus, even the most sensitive and responsive parent may become less consistently available and attuned to their child's emotional needs. (Paley, Lester & Mogil, 2013). The impact of the deploying parent's departure will be mitigated if children feel securely bonded to a non-deploying parent who copes effectively and maintains relatively stable parenting practices (Riggs & Riggs, 2007).

There are many other behavioral factors associated with attachment that are observable in young children when a mother is deployed. Despite a positive attachment within a family, individuals can experience numbness or disorientation, a sense of abandonment, mood and sleep problems, followed by a period of emotional and behavioral disorganization, anger and resentment (Riggs & Riggs, 2007). These reactions seem to be connected with feeling the loss of a primary caregiver.

Other behavior and mood problems are often present for young children. Barker & Berry (2009) found that "home discipline problems, sadness, and increased demands for attention may be present in as many as 25-50% of children younger than 5 with a deployed parent. Changes in appetite and sleep disturbances/nightmares may also be common. These behavior problems are more pronounced in young children, especially boys (Barker & Berry, 2009). School performance is an additional area that children tend to struggle in when a parent is deployed.

### **Adolescents**

It is not uncommon for parents to rely on older children or adolescents to take on responsibilities of the deployed parent. Some of this additional responsibility may have positive effects, such as allowing children to develop new skills, increased confidence, and a sense of contributing to the larger family “mission” (Paley, Lester & Mogil, 2013). There is also a potential that when boundaries become less distinct, parents will begin to rely on their child in a way that exceeds the child’s developmental capacities, and may burden the child with concerns that they are not equipped to handle. Moreover, children who assume significant responsibilities in the absence of the deployed parent may miss out on opportunities to participate in age-expected activities (Paley, Lester & Mogil, 2013).

Adolescents within a military family often do relatively well when a parent is deployed. It is common for older children to step into the role of a secondary caregiver and take on some household responsibilities. In addition, adolescents often become more independent, are less likely to experience declining academic performance, depressive symptoms, and behavioral problems in response to emotional stress (Department of Defense, 2010). The resilience of adolescents in military families is beneficial to other caregivers and younger siblings. Resilience is a common characteristic of military families and is important for the well-being of the family.

### **Effects of Deployment on Veterans**

Service members experience an extended time with many adjustments when faced with an overseas deployment. Military deployments create a series of events that begin when a service member is notified of future deployment, continue during the deployment, and are also present during the reintegration back into the family and the community (Riggs & Riggs, 2007). During the time frame before, during and after deployment there are numerous struggles that the service member must overcome. In regard to relationships, it is common to experience increased



difficulties in intimate relationships, marital difficulties, relationship dissatisfaction, domestic violence, parenting problems (Riggs & Riggs, 2007). The stress of deployment along with the experiences while in a warzone seems to affect both the service member and the people that are involved in the relationships surrounding them.

### **Psychological Impacts for Veterans**

Upon returning home, there are many concerns for veterans that have served in OIF and OEF. Mental health evaluations are an important tool to measure the needs of returning service members. Lieberman & VanHorn (2013) reviewed figures assembled by the Zero to Three: Coming Together Around Military Families, which is an organization that promotes health and wellness of infants and toddlers within military families. In this survey of veterans, 14% of respondents met criteria for depression and 14% met criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (Lieberman & Van Horn, 2013). These results suggest that mental health evaluation and treatment is a necessary component of care for returning veterans.

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) is a common mental health concern for veterans returning from Iraq or Afghanistan. Participating in a mental health evaluation is again imperative to discover symptoms for this serious mental illness. Common signs of PTSD are communication difficulties, trouble expressing emotion, and issues with trust, self-disclosure, isolation, sociability, anger control, hostility and physical aggression (Riggs & Riggs, 2007). Being aware of the indications of PTSD in service members is important in order to assist in providing the necessary support to overcome this disorder.

Along with mental health concerns, there are other factors which alter how a veteran reintegrates into civilian life. In a review of literature conducted by Lieberman & VanHorn (2013), it was also found that 40% of respondents reported feeling like a guest in the household,

37% were unsure of their role in the family, 25% perceived their children as not warm or afraid, 25% said that their spouse or partner was afraid, 54% described themselves as shouting, pushing, or shoving a family member. The emotions and physical reactions that a veteran experiences have implications for both the service member and the involved family. Veterans that suffer from psychological problems may be physically present in the family system, but absent from the family both emotionally and functionally (Riggs & Riggs, 2007).

### **Specific Implications for Veteran Mothers and their Children**

The current conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan have included women in becoming a substantial portion of the service members being deployed. As of September 2009, women account for 14.3 percent of the Active duty component and 17.8 percent of the Reserve component (Department of Defense, 2010). This is an increase compared to the numbers of women that have been involved in combat related deployment for prior conflicts. It should also be noted that the percentages of active duty women with children is comparable to the amounts of active duty men with children. Approximately 40 percent of women in the active duty force have children, compared to 44 percent of active duty men (Joint Economic Committee, 2007). Due to the increase in women with children being involved in combat related deployment this is a topic that needs to be discovered further.

The characteristics of deployment have also changed during OIF/ OEF, which has caused specific consequences for female service members with children. During the war in Iraq average deployments have increased from 12 to 15 months, with an increased likelihood that a military member will be deployed on multiple tours (Joint Economic Committee, 2007). Longer and more dangerous deployments raise unique challenges for mothers in the military. Issues such as child care access, medical leave, and health care service are common challenges for mothers

(Joint Economic Committee, 2007). Deployment times, characteristics and implications for mothers are all factors involving deployed mothers which need to be recognized and managed.

Similar to mothers living in the civilian world, military mothers face numerous stressors. When a deployment is in the future for a mother, there are many factors that need to be considered. Research by Kelley, Herzog- Simmer, Harris (1994) gathered responses of 118 United States Navy mothers on various stress, anxiety and functioning indexes. This study found that mothers anticipating deployment report that the parenting role was more stressful and that their children were more difficult (Kelley, Herzog- Simmer, Harris, 1994). This is often due to the long hours spent training with little time for leave. Intensive training can cause mothers to have less time, energy, and patience for their children. For mothers about to deploy, perceived concerns about the upcoming separation may have contributed to their reports of higher parenting stress (Kelley, Herzog- Simmer, Harris, 1994). Although pre-deployment is often considered to be a time for families to prepare, the training and stress that is present during this time frame begins the struggle for both service members and their families.

More recently, a study by Goodman et al (2013) interviewed thirty- five active duty mothers and their children. These mothers had been deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan and had children age 12 or younger. The interviews of these mothers found common feelings and emotions present for mothers when deployment occurs. “Some mothers and their children experience separation anxiety, inadequate maternal role functioning, poor emotional functioning, depression and anxiety” (Goodman et al., 2013). These feelings are likely due to the separation from family and children. After returning home, it has been found that mothers continue to struggle with their deployment experiences (Goodman et al., 2013).

Women in the current conflicts report a high level of emotional trauma and difficulty adjusting back to family life after deployment. In addition, women report limited access to women's health care service and post deployment counseling service (Joint Economic Committee, 2007). Research at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston examined 33 veterans of Operation Desert Storm. This study had similarly found that women experience emotional trauma and difficulty. Following Operation Desert Storm women with children reported a higher rate of emotional health problems after deployment (64 %) than women without children (39 %) including anxiety and difficulty readjusting to civilian life (Joint Economic Committee, 2007).

The struggles that mothers have while serving in the military may have an impact on the amount of time that a woman stays in service. It has been found that women have a higher rate of attrition than men in the military, likely due to child care and family responsibilities (Joint Economic Committee, 2007). These family responsibilities create an extra level of stress for female service members. Specific difficulties with parenting have been cited as reasons for leaving the military prematurely (Joint Economic Committee, 2007). DOD surveys from military mothers report "the amount of time separated from family" as the most important reason for leaving the military before retirement. Female troops are also less likely to receive support from their family when they decide to stay in the military (Mulhall, 2009). Perhaps further knowledge in this area can assist mothers with family responsibilities and allow for longer military careers.

### **Gaps in Current Literature**

There are many topics regarding military deployment which need to be further researched. The impact of a mother's deployment on the woman service member and her family is one area that has not been studied extensively. Though the number of deployed women

continues to rise, little is known about how maternal absence affects children differently from the paternal absence (Department of Defense, 2010). In addition, most of the current research on military deployment in regard to effects on parenting has only been investigated during a short period of time. Most studies to date have not followed military families over time, yet the impact of deployment entails a dynamic rather than a static process that unfolds not only over the course of a single deployment, but across multiple deployments, and at multiple levels (Paley, Lester, Mogil, 2013). Further exploration of military families experiencing deployment over time would be beneficial to providing resources to these families.

Though there is extensive literature on the effects of parental absence due to changes in the family such as parental divorce, illness, death, and incarceration, little is known about the effects of parental absence created by work requirements (Department of Defense, 2010)..

Among work-related parental absence, military deployment stands out due to its unique characteristics, including the frequency, duration, hazardous nature of deployment, and special societal values attributed to military service (Department of Defense, 2010). Further research is necessary in order to determine the specific implications that parental absence has on a family when the absence is caused by military deployment.

An additional reason that further research is needed in regard to military deployment within families is for the professionals whom are practicing in the field. The mental health field must become better prepared to support service members and families across a rapidly evolving landscape of military operations around the world, including those who are making the transition from active duty to veteran status and navigating a return to civilian life and those families in which parents will continue to actively serve and deploy in combat zones (Paley, Lester &

Mogil, 2013). Investigating what effects deployment has on those involved will allow social workers, and other mental health professionals, to better serve this population.

### **Summary**

Deployment is a stressful event for military families. Each family member has a unique experience depending on their age and status within the family structure. Current research has examined how family structure and family systems change when a parent is deployed. The role change of the non-deployed parent is another important consideration involved with deployment. In addition, children of all ages see specific implications on their life when a parent is deployed. Finally, the well-being of veterans is a vital issue to take into account. Each of these factors related to deployment can be altered when the deployed service member is a mother. Further research is necessary to better understand exactly how deployment has an impression on female service members and their families.

### **Conceptual Framework**

When families experience the deployment of a mother, the entire environment that they live in is impacted. The relationship between an individual or family and their environment is significantly changed when the other of their family is deployed. For these reasons, the ecological model will be used to explore the question, “What are the common issues related to deployment present for women veterans and their families upon returning home?”

Ecology is the interdisciplinary science that studies the relations between organisms and their environment (Forte, 2007). When a family member temporarily leaves the family structure, this causes a change in environment for all who are involved. A mother deploying overseas will have to adapt to a new living situation and surviving in a dangerous warzone. On the other hand, the family that is left behind will also experience the loss of an important person from their environment. Children may feel anxious or sad while other caregivers take on the stress of single parenthood. This can be especially true when a mother is deployed, as a mother is often the primary attachment figure for children.

The ecological model uses knowledge from human ecology which is defined as “the study of the spatial and temporal relations of human beings as affected by the selective, distributive, and accommodative forces of the environment” (Forte, 2007, p. 119). This framework was selected due to the ways that a person will experience changes and difficulties in their environment while a mother is deployed. In addition, the environment that an individual lives in may be beneficial or detrimental to coping with deployment. The presence or absence of outside support systems within an environment is often expected to have some impact on deployment within a family.

Urie Bronfenbrenner, a well-known psychologist who lived until 2005, developed the ecological theory of human development. This theory focuses on the entire life course and does not highlight specific stages. According to Carel Germain, a distinguished social work ecological theorist, Bronfenbrenner “recognizes the influence of biological and cultural factors on development and the significance of psychological processes such as perception, motivation, emotion, thinking, and learning” (Forte, 2007). Being deployed to a warzone may also affect the preexisting biological and cultural factors, in addition to psychological processes of perception, motivation, emotion, thinking and learning which Bronfenbrenner recognizes, according to Carel Germain.

Key assumptions of the ecological theory include unpredictability of the life course and a lack of universal stages due to factors such as culture, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation (Forte, 2007). A mother deploying to Iraq or Afghanistan also causes unpredictability in the life course. In addition, factors such as culture, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation add an additional level of unpredictability can present itself in terms of how different family units cope with a mother’s deployment.

Ecological social workers direct their practice efforts toward improving the transactions between people and environments, nurturing human developments within particular environments, and improving environments so that they support the expression of clients systems’ positive dispositions and potentials (Forte, 2007). Families that experience a mother being deployed have their environments turned upside down. Examining environmental factors for families experiencing deployment aids in improving these existing environments and potentials.



Within each person's environment there are multiple levels of interaction. Examining each of these levels allows for a more in depth understanding of an individual's situation. Using this multi-level approach contributes to social workers having a better grasp on how a mother's military deployment impacts the entire family. The most immediate level is the *microsystem*. The *microsystem* includes systems such as the home, the classroom, and the neighborhood in which the person develops. This setting is a specific place with identifiable physical features where developing persons participate in specific activities at a particular time (Forte, 2007). Clearly, the immediate, or micro level, environment will see changes due to a military mother's deployment.

The *mesosystem* is the second level within a person's environment. The *mesosystem* is a system of relationships between two or more immediate settings (Forte, 2007). An example of a *mesosystem* would be the interaction between a child and their school. When a family is faced with military deployment, each member's interaction with the school setting can be altered. A military mother may also have a *mesosystem* interaction with the caregivers which provide care for her children. Military deployment can potentially create a situation in which outside caregivers are necessary for long periods of time. Locating reliable child care during a service member's absence creates a unique challenge for military mothers.

The third system to be considered is the *macrosystem*. A *macrosystem* is consistencies that exist at the level of culture and ideology including values, laws, and customs (Forte, 2007). In regard to military deployment, society's views on the current conflicts may alter the *macrosystem* that a military family is living in. Depending on the community that a service members lives in, it is possible that community members are not aware of the challenges that military families face. The understanding of military families, in addition to ideas and values related to the military within each community will influence how a family copes with military

deployment. The link between each of these systems is labeled as a *transaction*. Connections are conceptualized as *transactions*, or reciprocal exchanges between entities in the environment (Forte, 2007). Military families are integrated in multiple systems which result in subsequent transactions between each system.

The ecological theory will be used to explore the complex issues that arise for different families when a mother is deployed. Each family exists in their own unique life style which is impacted by environmental factors. The ecological lens will be used to inspect each distinctive participants experience with deployment through a secondary data analysis. An analysis of interviews will identify any common issues or struggles despite all of the diversity that is present using an ecological lens. Knowledge of common issues related to a mother's deployment will allow social workers, and other mental health workers to serve this population more effectively.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

This study was a secondary data analysis collected from an ongoing study examining military experiences in relation to parenting for veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. Data was collected beginning in June 2010 at a large Midwestern University. Qualitative interviews were used to collect data in order to describe the unique experience surrounding deployment for each service member and their family.

During the qualitative interview women veterans and their children participated in three discussions. First, mothers are asked to choose an issue not related to deployment, discuss this issue with their child, and attempt to solve this issue. Next, children are asked to choose an issue not related to deployment, discuss the issue with their mother, and attempt to solve this issue. Finally, the dyad is asked to discuss an issue related to deployment that the mother chose. The dyad first discusses how they handled the deployment issue and is then asked to discuss how they would handle the issue if the mother was deployed again. Quantitative surveys were also used to collect demographic information about the mother and child.

The current study used a portion of the larger qualitative interviews which specifically discuss family and deployment issues. Demographic information from the quantitative surveys was also utilized to access descriptions of each participant. The purpose of the current study was to explore the impacts of OIF/OEF deployment which are specific to women veterans and their families within the larger sample (both male and female) of the earlier study. The research question that was examined was: What are the common issues related to deployment present for women veterans and their families upon returning home?

### **Sample**

The researcher used data recorded from a previous study on parenting in military deployment. The current research focused specifically on women veterans and their children. Eight interviews with women veterans and their child from the larger sample were randomly selected. Each child was between the age of 5 and 12. If there was more than one child in a family, the youngest child within the age range of 5 to 12 was asked to participate. Data collected included mother's age, race, highest level of education, occupational status, marital status, rank in military, and number of deployments. Data collected for children was gender and age of child.

### **Protection of human subjects**

The data used is a secondary analysis of research done at a large Midwestern University. The principle investigator for the original research gave written permission to use this data. Data used for this secondary analysis was de-identified and remains property of the University conducting the larger research. All data was de-identified using assigned family identification numbers. Data was stored on a password protected University website that is only accessible to research staff.

All participants willingly volunteered to be a part of this research and signed consent forms describing both risks and benefits to the study. In addition, each family signed a consent form to be videotaped. The determined risks of the larger study were feeling uncomfortable with being videotaped and a potential feeling of discomfort while discussing deployment issues. Benefits to the larger study were receiving information that is useful and supportive to military families. There are no risks or benefits for participants for this secondary data analysis.

### **Data Collection**

Data was collected for this secondary data analysis using the following steps:

1. This secondary data analysis was given written approval by the larger study's Principal Investigator.
2. The current researcher had direct access to the qualitative interviews and demographic information.
3. De-identified data was randomly chosen based on the mother of the family reporting that she was the service member within the family.
4. The researcher accessed the following information for each family
  - a. Information regarding mother's deployment status was accessed through demographic surveys completed by the participant. Data is stored in research lab and was not taken off of that property.
  - b. Quantitative data collected included mother's age, race, highest level of education, occupational status, marital status, rank in military, and number of deployments. Data collected for children was gender and age of child.
  - c. Researcher used de-identified list to access family's qualitative tasks.
  - d. Qualitative tasks included discussion of:
    - i. Mother's non- deployment issue and how to solve the issue. Non-deployment issues were chosen from a list provided. Participants also had the option of choosing "other" and coming up with their own topic.
    - ii. Child's non-deployment issue and how to solve the issue. Non-deployment issues were chosen from a list provided. Participants also had the option of choosing "other" and coming up with their own topic.

- iii. Mother's deployment issue and how the issue would be handled is the mother was deployed again. Deployment issues were chosen from a list provided. Participant's also had the option of choosing "other" and coming up with their own topic.
5. Data analysis of qualitative tasks was conducted to examine common issues present for women veterans and their families. These discussions were approximately half of the entire qualitative interview which was collected for the larger study.

### **Data Analysis**

A qualitative data analysis was used to answer the following question: "What are the common issues related to deployment present for women veterans and their families upon returning home?" Interviews with women veterans and their children were transcribed for a qualitative analysis. This data was first examined using an inductive analysis. This analysis identified common themes present which are prompted by the interview questions.

Quantitative data analysis was performed in order to identify demographic information. The total sample of the larger study consists of 400 OIF/ OEF veterans and their children. For this research, eight interviews of women veterans with children ages 5-12 were used. In addition, data collected regarding mother's age, race, highest level of education, occupational status, marital status, rank in military, and number of deployments was analyzed. Data collected for children was gender and age of child was analyzed.

### **Researcher Bias**

The current researcher expects to find common themes present for women veterans and their children after being deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan. The current researcher has worked

with OIF/OEF veterans in a research capacity for over three years. This experience may make the researcher more sensitive to key issues present for the veteran population.

### Findings

Eight mothers and their children were randomly selected to be used for this research. Each of the eight mother's randomly selected for this study reported their race as Caucasian. The age ranged from one mother being in her twenties, three mothers were in their thirties, two mothers were in their forties, and two mothers did not report their age. Educational background reported was; one mother completed high school, three mothers completed some college, three mothers had a college degree, and one mother had a Master's degree. Seven mothers reported being employed full time and one mother reported being unemployed. Four mothers reported never being married, one mother was married, two were divorced, and one was separated.

**Table 1: Mother's Demographic Information**

| <b>ID #</b> | <b>Age</b>   | <b>Race</b> | <b>Highest Education</b> | <b>Occupational Status</b> | <b>Marital Status</b> |
|-------------|--------------|-------------|--------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------|
| 1           | 43           | White       | 4 year degree            | Unemployed                 | Divorced              |
| 2           | 35           | White       | Some college             | Employed full time         | Never married         |
| 3           | Not reported | White       | 4 year degree            | Employed full time         | Separated             |
| 4           | 26           | White       | Some college             | Employed full time         | Never married         |
| 5           | Not reported | White       | Some college             | Employed full time         | Never married         |
| 6           | 41           | White       | Master's degree          | Employed full time         | Divorced              |
| 7           | 31           | White       | High school diploma      | Employed full time         | Married               |
| 8           | 34           | White       | 4 year degree            | Employed full time         | Never married         |

Information regarding the number of deployments and military rank was also collected. Seven of the eight mothers had been deployed twice and one mother had been deployed three times. Four mothers reported their rank as Sergeant and two mothers reported rank as Staff



Sergeant. One mother reported rank as a Major and one mother reported rank as Lieutenant colonel.

**Table 2: Mother's Deployment Information**

| ID # | Rank in Military | Number of Deployments |
|------|------------------|-----------------------|
| 1    | Staff sergeant   | 3                     |
| 2    | SGT              | 2                     |
| 3    | LTC              | 2                     |
| 4    | E-5              | 2                     |
| 5    | Staff sergeant   | 2                     |
| 6    | Major            | 2                     |
| 7    | Sergeant         | 2                     |
| 8    | E-5              | 2                     |

Demographic information for the participating children was also collected. Four children participating were female and four were male. Seven of the children had a reported race as Caucasian and one child's race was reported as mixed race of Caucasian and African American. Within the 5-12 age range, the breakdown of ages was two- 6 year olds, one- 8 year old, two- 9 year olds, and three children ages 10, 11 and 12 years old.

**Table 3: Child's Demographic Information**

| ID # | Child Age | Child Gender | Child Race  |
|------|-----------|--------------|-------------|
| 1    | 11        | Male         | White       |
| 2    | 10        | Male         | White       |
| 3    | 12        | Female       | White       |
| 4    | 8         | Female       | White/Black |
| 5    | 9         | Male         | White       |
| 6    | 9         | Male         | White       |
| 7    | 6         | Female       | White       |
| 8    | 6         | Female       | White       |

Eight interviews with women veterans and their children were randomly selected to be analyzed. Each mother and child discussed three questions: What was a non-deployment related issue present as selected by the mother and how could it be solved? What was a non-deployment related issue present as selected by the child and how could it be solved? What was a deployment related issue as selected by the mother and how would the issue be handled if deployment occurred again?

### **Issues Not Related to Deployment for Parents**

To begin the interviews, the mothers and children were first asked to discuss an issue that was not related to deployment. Both the mother and the child were asked to pick an issue that was concerning to them. Both the mother and child were given time to discuss and try to solve each issue. The purpose of beginning with these issues was to examine general struggles for military families and how they are able to talk about and solve these issues. General issues were also used initially as a way to begin talking about and problem solving with a topic that was less challenging than deployment. The issues chosen by mothers (n=8) fell into the following categories: housework or helping around the house, fighting with parents or siblings, personal hygiene and school.

**Housework.** Three mothers chose issues related to housework or helping around the house which was the first theme gathered from the non-deployment discussions. One mother was shared with her child the reasons why housework was an important issue for her “So what if you got an electric scooter, something you really, really wanted, and people didn’t take care of it?” (Participant 3, page 2). Other mothers that chose this topic had similar concerns stating, “Most of the time you take out the toys and mom ends up having to pick them up” and “Put (stuff) away where it’s supposed to be and don’t make mommy have to tell you five different times”

(Participant 5, page 1). Balancing housework and the stressors of deployment appears to be an issue for women veterans in the home.

**Fighting with Parents and Siblings.** Three additional mothers chose issues related to fighting with siblings or parents. Mothers discussed these issues with their children regarding fighting with parents and siblings for various reasons. One mother stated, “Our biggest problem is when you (child) do something and I send you to time out and you knock over chairs, toss things around, say I hate you and you’re the worst mom ever” (Participant 1, page 1). In regard to fighting with siblings, one child stated that she fights with her sister because “She wants whatever I am playing with and she wants to be just like me” (Participant 7, page 1). Similar to non-military families, service members struggle with issues of children fighting with parents and siblings in the home. These common stressors are combined with the pressure of deployment may cause strain within military families.

**Other Issues.** One mother chose issues related to personal hygiene and one mother chose issues related to school in the remaining two non-deployment discussions. These issues did not result in themes due to one mother picking each topic. While discussing personal hygiene the mother commented, “You don’t like to take a shower.. You scream sometimes and you cry, and how about when I ask you to brush your teeth?” (Participant 6, page 1). During the school discussion the mother and child talked about reasons why the child did not like school. The participating child stated, “I hate school...because I’m bored... because I have to get up early” (Participant 8, page 1).

During each of the eight discussions, five of the parent and child dyads were able to discuss the issue and come up with possible solutions. An example of finding a solution to mother’s non-deployment issues can be seen in a discussion regarding fighting with siblings.

While discussing how to solve this issue the mother stated, “I know she (sibling) likes to have your toys. Maybe when she does we can figure out something else, if we get her interested in something else she’ll want to do that and then you can go back to playing with what you were playing” (Participant 7, page 1).

The remaining three parent child dyads were not able to come up with possible solutions to their issues or the child refused to discuss the topic. One discussion in which the mother and child dyad was not able to come up with a solution was regarding housework. The participating child stated, “You always will (be crabby). You get crabby when you see one piece of dirt on the floor. If you come home and there is one piece of dirt on the floor you say ‘why didn’t you sweep the floor’” (Participant 3, page 1).

### **Issues Not Related to Deployment for Children**

The issues chosen by children (n= 8) fell into the following categories: Fighting with siblings, hygiene, going to bed, and cleaning their room. Four children chose issues related to fighting with siblings, two children chose issues related to hygiene, one child chose issues related to going to bed, and one child chose issues related to cleaning their room. Four children chose fighting with siblings as their non-deployment issue to discuss, which resulted in a theme. One child expressed the issues he had in relation to fighting with his brother, “We fight about the remote when we are watching TV, we fight about what shows we want to watch, we fight about everything” (Participant 6, page 3).

During these discussions, six of the mother child dyads were able to discuss the issue and come up with possible solutions. During an additional discussion regarding fighting with siblings, the child was able to come up with the following solution with her mother’s assistance, “We can talk nicely. I can talk nicely to her and tell her not to do it or if we put her in the corner

I can just stay calm with her” (Participant 7, page 2). The remaining two parent child dyads were not able to discuss the issue and come with up possible solutions or the child refused to discuss the topic. An example of not solving the non-deployment issue can also be seen with the chosen topic of fighting with siblings. One child stated, “Stop trying to act serious because you aren’t serious. It drives me crazy when you do that... What should I do, punch her (sibling) in the face?” (Participant 3, pages 3-5).

### **Deployment Issues**

Each mother was next asked to pick a topic related to deployment. The mother and child were asked to discuss the topic and try to come up with a possible solution. After this discussion, the parent and child were asked to discuss how they would handle the issue if the mother was deployed again. The issues chosen by the mothers fell into the following categories: Sadness about the deployed parent being gone, talking about deployment, communicating during deployment, missing birthdays during deployment, the fear of a parent being injured or killed during deployment and giving the parent space after deployment.

**Sadness about the Deployed Parent Being Gone.** Two of the eight mothers chose to discuss sadness about the deployed parent being gone during their deployment discussion with their child. The mothers that chose this discussion both had daughters that were ages eight and twelve. These children reported feeling sad and missing their mother while she was deployed. One child stated, “I missed you, you’re my mom” (Participant 3, page 5). Each of the daughters also reported that they do not like to be away from their mothers since she has returned from deployment. The same child stated that she continues to get sad, “When you (mom) go somewhere for more than a day” (Participant 3, page 5).

After the initial discussion, these two dyads were asked to discuss how sadness about deployment would be handled if the mother was deployed again in the future. One child reported that she would again feel sad and would not want to go stay with her father. The second mother child dyad had similar discussion topics as the daughter stated that she would be sad and also would not want to stay with her father. Other worries present for this child were that no one would be available to help her wake her up for school in the morning and which school she would attend if her mother was deployed again. "I wouldn't sleep in my own bed. Not without you here. Then I would have no one to wake me up for school if you were gone" (Participant 4, page 7).

**Talking about Deployment.** Two of the eight mothers chose to discuss talking about deployment during their deployment discussion with their child. Although these mothers chose talking about deployment for their discussion topic, the emotions that children and parents had surrounding a mother being deployed were main components within the discussion. The mothers that chose this discussion both had female children and each was six years old. These children reported being mad and sad when recalling the time that their mother was deployed. When asked about her mother begin gone for another year one child stated, "I would be mad, then I would stop being mad and be sad" (Participant 7, page 3). In addition, after stating that she was sad, the other child refused to further discuss deployment with her mother.

After this initial discussion, the mothers were asked to discuss how they would talk about deployment with their children if they were to be deployed again. One child reported that she would be scared and sad if her mother was deployed again. This child also stated that she would do her homework by herself and change her younger brother's diaper if her mother deployed again with promoting from her mother. The second mother and child dyad discussed talking

more about deployment in advance if the mother needed to be deployed again. This dyad discussed talking on the phone more often and using Skype to communicate. The mother stated, “We could talk about how you feel. If you’re mad or confused or hurt. When I was going I was mad because I wouldn’t be around to see you and I was hurt because I wanted to see you” (Participant 7, page 4). An additional way that this dyad discussed to cope with another deployment would be to take a vacation together before the mother went overseas.

**Communicating During Deployment.** One of the eight mothers chose to discuss communicating during deployment for the deployment discussion. The mother that chose to discuss this topic had a ten year old son. Her son stated that he was upset his mother was not able to answer her cell phone and had there was not contact with his mother by other means. He stated, “My issues with communication were that you would never pick up your phone, you would barely ever be on Skype, and you almost never wrote letters” (Participant 2, page 5). His mother agreed with his frustrations and expressed that cell phone service was not always available where she was staying overseas.

After the initial discussion, the mother and son were asked how they would handle communication during deployment if the mother was deployed again. The mother and son discussed how the time difference made it difficult to communicate during previous deployments. They decided that they would try their best to communicate despite the differences in time. The dyad also decided that they would attempt to make more calls via Skype so that they could see each other while they were communicating.

**Missing Birthdays During Deployment.** One mother chose missing birthdays during deployment as the deployment topic to discuss. This mother had an eleven year old boy. Her son reported feeling bad and missing his mom when she was deployed on his birthday. Both the

mother and the son also reported that they cried the child's birthday when the mother was gone due to deployment. The mother asked her son how he felt when she missed other events, such as sports games that he played in. Her son replied that he was not as upset about her missing these events but most upset about his mother missing birthdays. The mother stated, "Missing your birthday was worse than any other day, it was tough on me too" (Participant 1, page 4).

This mother and son were then asked how they would handle missing birthdays if the mother was deployed again. The son stated that he would like his mother to send him something on his birthday when she was gone. The dyad also decided that they would have another birthday party when the mom returned home from deployment to make up for missing the original birthday party. The mother stated, "Do an artificial birthday... Have another birthday party with cake and ice cream, and of course more presents because you like presents" (Participant 1, page 5).

**Fear of Parent Being Injured or Killed During Deployment.** One mother chose the topic of a parent being injured or killed during deployment for her deployment discussion. This mother had a nine year old boy. Her child reported feeling scared, sad and nervous that his mother would be hurt during deployment. The child also remembered that three people that were deployed with his mother were injured during that tour. Part way through the discussion the child stated that he did not want to discuss his mother being injured or killed during deployment and this discussion ended.

When asked how this child would feel if his mother were to be deployed again he reported that it would be harder and would feel worse about his mother being deployed. The son stated that he would be sad about an additional deployment and would try to go overseas with his



mother. This child then stated that he was becoming irritated due to discussing the topic of redeployment and the deployment discussion was ended.

**Giving Parent Space After Deployment.** One mother chose giving space after deployment for the deployment discussion. This topic was chosen after the participating mother chose “other” and listed her own deployment issue that was not on the list provided. This mother participated in the conversation with her nine year old son. This mother stated that she struggled to get her school work done after returning from deployment due to her son struggling to give her space. Her son acknowledged that it was difficult for him to be away from his mother since she returned from her time overseas.

The mother and son were then asked to discuss how they would handle the issue of mother needing space if deployment were to occur again. The mother explained that she becomes angry when her son bothers her while she is trying to get school work done. The mother stated, “My issue is when I have to study or when I have to be alone and you come in and say, ‘Mom, I have a question about this’” (Participant 6, page 4). She suggested that her son could ask others for help during the times that she needed space to complete school work. After the mother suggested this idea her son replied that he was worried no one else would be available to help him around the house.

### **Themes Present in Deployment Discussion**

**Emotions Surrounding the Deployment.** Although the deployment conversations varied between mothers and children due to unique experiences that each family faces, the theme of emotions was present across many discussions. The emotions that accompany having a mother being deployed were discussed in nearly every deployment conversation for this research. Two mothers specifically chose sadness about the deployed parent being gone to discuss, while seven

of the eight deployment discussions included the feelings that were experienced during deployment. The children in this study used the words sad, mad, upset, bad, scared and nervous to describe how they felt about their mother being deployed overseas.

### **Deployment Issues Conclusion**

Each family participating in the deployment discussion had the opportunity to choose their own topic of concern when discussing issues related to deployment. Two families chose to discuss sadness about the mother being gone and two families chose to discuss talking about deployment. The other four topics chosen were communicating during deployment, missing birthdays, the parent being injured or killed during deployment and giving the parent space upon returning home.

Although each family had a discussion which related to their unique experience, there were similar discussions present throughout each topic. One similar theme present was that children (n=7) had feelings such as sadness, anger or fear about their mother being deployed. These feelings were also present for some of the mothers while deployed. While not a theme, another common issue was that children (n=2) found it difficult to be away from their mothers after they returned from deployment. Finally, two children stated that if their mothers were deployed again that they would try to come with them.

### **Ability to Solve Deployment Issues**

The ability to solve general issues and deployment issues was also examined for this research. Four of the eight families interviewed were able to discuss and come up with possible solutions for both their general family issues and deployment related issues. Two of the eight families were able to solve non-deployment issues but were unable to solve with deployment related issues. The two issues that were not solved for these families were the fear of the parent

being injured or killed during deployment and the parent needing space upon returning from deployment.

Two of the eight families were unable to solve both the non-deployment issue and the deployment issue. The issues that these families were unable to solve were sadness about the deployed parent being gone and talking about the deployment. The age and gender of the child did not seem to impact whether or not the mother and child were able to come up with a solution during their problem solving discussion for deployment. An equal number of male and female children were able to solve both their non-deployment and deployment related issue. The age range for the children that were unable to solve their non-deployment and deployment issues was six to twelve years old.

## **Discussion**

This research intended to examine the deployment issues that are present for women veterans and their children. This study supported many of the common issues regarding struggles that are present for families after deployment in the current literature. This discussion will examine the existing literature and the results of this study.

### **Emotions Surrounding the Deployment**

The main theme present in this research was that there are many emotions which accompany overseas deployment. During the deployment discussions, two families chose to discuss sadness about the mother being gone and two families chose to discuss talking about deployment. Of the four families that either chose sadness during deployment or communicating during deployment, all of the children were female. The other four topics; communicating during deployment, missing birthdays, the parent being injured or killed during deployment and giving the parent space upon returning home were all chosen by mothers that had male children.

While there were various topics chosen by mothers to discuss in relation to deployment, the emotions which are associated with each topic were brought up in seven of the eight deployment discussions. Mothers with female children chosen topics directly related to the emotions surrounding deployment such as sadness about the mother being gone. Mothers with male children chose topics which were indirectly related to the emotions surrounding deployment such as missing birthdays during deployment. Although mothers with male children did not specifically choose a topic related to emotions, the feelings that accompany deployment came up in three of the four conversations. Further research may examine differences in male and female children and their reactions to a mother's deployment.

Clearly, the emotions surrounding deployment are present for the deployed service member and their family that is left behind. In addition to the emotions that each family member experiences, there are many implications within the relationship that accompany the feelings that are present around deployment. This theme is similar to results from earlier studies regarding deployment. Previous research found that children of service members experience a period of emotional and behavioral disorganization, anger and resentment (Riggs & Riggs, 2007).

One result of deployment related emotions found in previous literature is a child having difficulty separating from their parent after returning from deployment. Research by Barker & Berry found that it is common that children do not want returning parent to leave the house (Barker & Berry, 2009, p. 1038). The current study found children experienced the same feelings regarding difficulty separating from their parent after returning from deployment. During the deployment discussions examined, two of the eight children reported that they have difficulty being away from their mother since she has returned from deployment. An additional two children stated that they would try to come with their mother if she were to be deployed again. Although the current sample size is small, half of the children interviewed reported difficulty being away from their mother since she returned home. Further research may examine a connection between attachment and separation anxiety after a mother returns from deployment.

### **Connection with Previous Literature**

In the current research, two of the eight families reported that talking about deployment was an issue for their family. Talking about deployment has also been found to be an important family process in similar literature. Riggs & Riggs (2007) found that communication processes, along with family belief systems and organizational patterns mediate how a family reacts to a stressful experience. The children that participated in discussing deployment expressed that they

would like to talk more about deployment in advance. In addition, one child stated that he would like to communicate more often with his mother if she was deployed again.

Similarly, communicating during deployment was the topic chosen by one mother during the deployment discussion. This child presented similar concerns regarding communication with his mother while she was deployed. This conversation corresponded with the chosen topics of talking about deployment as the mother and child decided they would make an effort to communicate more often if deployment was to occur again. Family communication processes have been found to mediate a family's reaction to stressful experiences (Riggs & Riggs, 2007). Communication appears to have been an important topic in the previous research on deployment. In the current research, the topic was only chosen by one participating mother and child dyad. The lack of discussion regarding communicating in the current research may be contributed to the age of the children or the requirement to choose only one deployment topic.

### **Additional Issues**

Additional issues that were present for these deployment discussions were missing birthdays during deployment, a parent being injured or killed during deployment and the parent needing space upon returning from deployment. Although each issue was chosen by one family, their significance can also be found in previous literature regarding deployment. Being absent during birthdays is not specifically mentioned in any of the literature found while organizing the current research. Attachment is an important topic to consider when a parent with young children deploys. Riggs & Riggs (2007) found that children can experience a sense of abandonment, anger and resentment when a primary caregiver is away for deployment. Further research could examine if these feelings are incorporated with a service member missing important life events, such as a child's birthday.

The topic of a fear that a parent will be injured or killed during deployment was of concern for one mother in the current study. This issue has also been discussed as a stressor for military families in previous research. Stressors related to deployment found previously included ambiguous loss and fear for a love one's safety (Riggs & Riggs, 2007). Although the current study had a small number of participants concerned with this topic, it is clear that the concern regarding deployment injury is present across multiple studies. The small number of families that chose the fear of a parent being injured or killed during deployment may be linked to avoidance of the difficult topic or the service member's position in the military and exposure to danger. A larger examination of the current data set would possibly provide a clearer depiction of the number of families that struggle with the fear for safety of the service member.

An additional topic present in this study was a parent needing space after returning home from deployment. This concept may be linked to the difficulty that women often have with post deployment adjustment and reintegration. Adjusting to family life and previous roles can be challenging for returning veterans. Research from The University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston found that women service members often struggle upon returning home from deployment. Following Operation Desert Storm women with children reported a higher rate of emotional health problems after deployment (64 %) than women without children (39 %) including anxiety and difficulty readjusting to civilian life (Joint Economic Committee, 2007).

### **Researcher Reaction**

While coding the qualitative interviews it was observed that many of the participating children had difficulty participating in both the non-deployment and deployment discussions. Each non-deployment discussion prompt asked the mother and child to first discuss their issue and try to figure out a way to solve it. The deployment prompts asked the mother and child to

discuss a deployment issue followed by a discussion of how they would handle the issue if the mother was deployed again. The difficulty that was present in completing these conversations may be linked to the ages of the children, the subject matter being discussed or the complexity of both discussion and problem solving. The lack of discussion between the mother and child during these conversations resulted in difficulty finding themes throughout the eight qualitative interviews.

### **Limitations / Recommendations for Future Research**

The sample examined for this study consisted of eight women veterans and their children. Each of these families resided in the Midwest. This sample may have influenced the responses that were obtained due to the small sample size. In addition, the relatively small area that these families reside in may not make this data applicable to the entire United States military population. An examination with larger sample sizes and varied demographic information may provide results which are more applicable to the entire population of women veterans.

A strength of the current study is the large original sample which the current, smaller sample has been taken from. An additional strength is that the current sample was randomly selected. A limitation of the current study is that the sample being examined is relatively small. A larger sample would have provided data which would have been more applicable to the entire military population. Future research should examine a larger sample size which could be better generalized to the larger population.

A second limitation for this research is the lack of diversity which was present within the sample. All eight of the randomly selected mothers in this research were Caucasian. Of the eight participating children seven were Caucasian and one was mixed race. Further research is necessary in order to attempt to collect a more diverse sample of veterans. Future research using



purposive sampling to obtain a variety of cultures may provide a more representative sample. Obtaining a diverse sample would again provide data which could be better generalized to the entire population. Future research should continue to study deployment issues for women veterans and their children due to the large number of recent deployments and the known mental health implications that deployment has on the entire family.

An additional limitation to this research was the lack of themes which were generated from the deployment discussions. The participating children came from the age range of 5-12 years old. The deployment issues which were chosen seemed to be challenging to discuss for children which were at the younger end of this range. In addition, many of the children experienced difficulty staying on the topic of deployment and completing their discussion. The lack of dialog between mother and child resulted in an absence of themes within the deployment discussions. Future research may examine more mother and child dyads in order to discover more themes present in deployment discussions.

### **Implications for Social Work and Policy**

The participants in this study confirmed that military families experience many challenges throughout the course of deployment. The emotions surrounding deployment was a key theme for seven of the eight participants in this research. Social workers should be aware of the difficult emotions that service members and their children experience throughout the course of deployment. Having this knowledge of these emotions and their implications can allow social workers to assess military families for the emotional and other implications which can occur post deployment. The knowledge of assessment and military experience can allow social workers to work more effectively with veterans and their families. Understanding the difficulties that accompany deployment can also help social workers to provide the resources that military

families need. Social workers can possess greater competence for working with military families when they recognize the experiences and events that military families live through.

Social workers should also understand that the military culture may be different than other groups of people that they may work with. It is common that service members that have been deployed have been trained to react to dangerous situations immediately. This training does not promote communicating emotions and struggles that may be present in family life after returning from deployment. Social workers should be aware that this culture is present and may build barriers for veterans seeking resources from social workers. As professionals, it is important to recognize different cultures and how they may impact the work that we do.

There are also policy implications that need to be addressed in mental health service for military veterans. The increase in deployments, in addition to the growing number of service members with children, enhances the need for both funding to create military specific treatments and appropriate training for the professional in the field.

### **Conclusion**

This research examined the deployment issues which were present for women veterans and their children. This research used secondary data from a larger, ongoing study of military veterans and their children. A strength of the current study was the focus on women veterans and their children, a population which has not been historically studied. Previous literature focused on male service members and lacked specific information on women veterans.

Deployment related issues were determined using discussions regarding non-deployment issues, deployment issues and problem solving conversations. The strongest theme present during the deployment issues discussions were the emotions that are present within in the family. Emotions have been found to be a significant factor related to deployment in the current and previous literature. Other issues that were present for the participating families were talking about deployment, communicating during deployment, missing birthdays during deployment, the parent being injured or killed during deployment and the parent needing space upon returning from deployment.

This sample provided evidence that the issues which were present for women veterans and their children locally are similar to the issues that are documented in current research. Social workers have in increasingly high level of involvement with military families due to the recent wars and increase in deployment. Due to this growth of veterans, social workers must have knowledge of the issues that are present for military families in order to provide the necessary services.

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Appendix A: Letter of Permission for Use of Data

[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

November 25, 2013

Dear Alca,

We have received your data sharing application for [REDACTED] [REDACTED] observational and demographic data. Your application has been approved for use at Saint Catherine University. You may access the data needed for your study.

Our understanding is that you will conduct the study under parameters in the Data Sharing Application you supplied in earlier communication.

Sincerely,

AGM

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]