

Experiences of U.S. military couples during the post-deployment transition: Applying the relational turbulence model

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Leanne K. Knobloch¹ and Jennifer A. Theiss²

Abstract

Although many military couples eagerly await reunion after deployment, the reentry of service members into family life can be challenging. This study employed the relational turbulence model to identify the issues facing military couples during the post-deployment transition. Individuals who had been reunited with their romantic partner during the past six months ($N = 259$; 137 service members, 122 partners) completed an online questionnaire. Content analytic results indicated that people encounter diverse changes to their relationship ($RQ1$), issues of relational uncertainty ($RQ2$), and interference in their daily routines ($RQ3$). Women, at-home partners, and reservist couples appear especially likely to encounter upheaval ($RQ4$). The relational turbulence model may have utility for illuminating the experiences of military couples upon reintegration.

Keywords

interference from partners, military deployment, relational turbulence, relational uncertainty

¹ University of Illinois, USA

² Rutgers University, USA

Corresponding author:

Leanne K. Knobloch, Department of Communication, University of Illinois, 1207 West Oregon Street, Room 225, Urbana, IL 61801, USA

Email: knobl@illinois.edu

The sacrifices U.S. military personnel make to safeguard freedom, sustain peace, and provide aid around the globe can take an enormous toll on their lives and the lives of their family members (American Psychological Association [APA], 2007; Burrell, Adams, Durand, & Castro, 2006). The cycle of deployment and reintegration, in particular, can be extraordinarily demanding (Basham, 2008; Hosek, Kavanagh, & Miller, 2006; SteelFisher, Zaslavsky, & Blendon, 2008). Not only do military families face the strain of separation during a tour of duty (e.g., Chandra et al., 2010; Hoge et al., 2004; Mansfield et al., 2010), but they also contend with a new set of stressors upon reunion (Palmer, 2008; Sahlstein, Maguire, & Timmerman, 2009). Although homecoming should be a joyous time for military couples, the reentry of a service member into the family can be more challenging than deployment itself (Doyle & Peterson, 2005; Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass, 2007; Mmari, Roche, Sudhinaraset, & Blum, 2009). In fact, both partners are at risk for depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and relationship distress during the six months following a tour of duty (McNulty, 2005; Nelson Goff, Crow, Reisbig, & Hamilton, 2007; Renshaw, Rodrigues, & Jones, 2008). The relationship changes that military couples experience during the post-deployment transition are not yet well understood (APA, 2007; Bowling & Sherman, 2008); consequently, the reunion period is a high priority for research (MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010; Sayers, Farrow, Ross, & Oslin, 2009; Willerton, MacDermid Wadsworth, & Riggs, 2011).

The *relational turbulence model* may shed light on the relationship changes that occur during the transition from deployment to reintegration. The model argues that people experience upheaval during times of transition because changes in relationship circumstances give rise to relational uncertainty and interference from partners (Knobloch & Theiss, 2010; Solomon, Weber, & Steuber, 2010). Previous work suggests that the model is useful for understanding the experiences of romantic partners upon making a serious commitment (Knobloch, 2007b; Solomon & Theiss, 2008), grappling with infertility (Steuber & Solomon, 2008), and receiving a breast cancer diagnosis (Weber & Solomon, 2008). We apply the model to a new context by considering the experiences of U.S. military personnel and at-home partners during the post-deployment transition. We analyze cross-sectional survey data from 259 individuals (137 service members, 122 partners) to examine whether the model has value for understanding the reintegration period.

Our study advances theorizing on the experiences of military couples during the post-deployment transition in two ways. At a basic level, we bring theory to bear on a topic that has been dominated by exploratory research (e.g., Huebner et al., 2007; Mmari et al., 2009; Wood, Scarville, & Gravino, 1995). At a more substantive level, our investigation is valuable for identifying the relationship changes that service members and at-home partners may encounter. The few theory-driven studies on how military couples relate during reentry have privileged ambiguous loss frameworks (Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008; Huebner et al., 2007), relational dialectics theory (Sahlstein et al., 2009), role-exit theory (Gambardella, 2008), and family stress perspectives (MacDermid Wadsworth, 2010; Wiens & Boss, 2006). The relational turbulence model is unique among these frameworks because it explicates the mechanisms within romantic relationships that may play a role in how couples navigate times of transition (see Solomon et al., 2010).

Our investigation also makes three methodological contributions to the literature on the dyadic functioning of military couples. First, we collect responses from male and female service members and at-home partners rather than from one cohort exclusively (c.f. SteelFisher et al., 2008; Wiens & Boss, 2006). Second, we gather data from participants across the country rather than individuals living at the same base or in the same region (c.f. Gambardella, 2008; Wood et al., 1995). Third, we solicit both qualitative and quantitative data to provide a more complete picture of the reunion period (cf. Faber et al., 2008; Sayers et al., 2009). We focus on the six-month period following reentry because it appears to be the critical window for family readjustment (Morse, 2006; PinCUS, House, Christenson, & Adler, 2001).

Relational turbulence and reintegration after deployment

The relational turbulence model seeks to explain relationships in transition (Knobloch & Theiss, 2010; Solomon & Knobloch, 2001; Theiss, Knobloch, Checton, & Magsamen-Conrad, 2009). *Relational turbulence* is people's propensity to be cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally reactive to interpersonal situations that would be nondescript in ordinary circumstances (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). Relational turbulence is manifest in both positively valenced and negatively valenced reactions to relationship changes (Solomon et al., 2010). For example, an Army wife may be more ecstatic at receiving a bouquet of roses from her soldier at homecoming than a year after the couple has been reunited. Similarly, a Marine may be more distressed by a disagreement over parenting if it occurs during the supposedly tranquil honeymoon phase following reunion than after the couple has resumed their everyday routines.

At present, the literature lacks a formal investigation of how people's romantic relationships change across the deployment cycle, but extant work implies that the post-deployment transition is replete with upheaval for military couples. During deployment, service members must concentrate on completing their mission and safeguarding the well-being of themselves and their comrades (Hosek et al., 2006); at-home partners must manage the household independently and perhaps adopt the role of single parent (Faber et al., 2008; Peebles-Kleiger & Kleiger, 1994; Sahlstein et al., 2009). Reentry alters people's lives once more. Returning warriors and romantic partners face the tasks of becoming reacquainted, reorganizing daily routines, redistributing control, managing strong emotions, and sharing information about experiences during deployment (Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Gambardella, 2008; Mmari et al., 2009). Not surprisingly, military couples report emotional numbness, difficulty conceding autonomy, feelings of insecurity, and awkwardness in sexual relations during the post-deployment transition (Peebles-Kleiger & Kleiger, 1994; Wood et al., 1995). A first research question lays the groundwork for our investigation by inquiring about the changes to relationships that military couples experience during the reunion period.

RQ1: What changes to their relationship, if any, do military personnel and partners report experiencing during the post-deployment transition?

The relational turbulence model identifies relational uncertainty and interference from partners as the reasons why people experience turmoil during times of transition. *Relational uncertainty* is the degree of confidence individuals have in their perceptions of involvement in a relationship (Knobloch, 2007a, 2010; Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Relational uncertainty includes questions about the self (“How certain am I about my view of this relationship?”), the partner (“How certain am I about my partner’s view of this relationship?”), and the relationship itself (“How certain am I about the future of this relationship?”). The model argues that relational uncertainty is salient during transitions because changing dyadic circumstances call into question people’s scripts, identities, and expectations. The model also proposes that individuals who are grappling with questions about involvement during transitions are prone to relational turbulence.

Research has identified issues of relational uncertainty that are prominent in a variety of dyadic contexts. For example, dating partners experience ambiguity about each person’s desire, evaluation, and goals for the relationship, along with questions about norms for behavior, mutuality of feelings, and the definition and future of the relationship (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). Spouses grapple with doubts about children, communication, career issues, finances, health, commitment, extended family, sexual intimacy, retirement, religious beliefs, leisure time, and household chores (Knobloch, 2008a). Partners diagnosed with infertility confront questions about being too invested or not invested enough in reproductive treatments, violating norms for supportiveness, and assigning blame for the inability to conceive (Steuber & Solomon, 2008). Similarly, individuals with breast cancer experience relational uncertainty about shifting identities, managing information, lending and receiving support, feeling understood, and navigating physical and sexual needs (Weber & Solomon, 2008).

Although scholars have not yet examined the issues of relational uncertainty that military couples face during the post-deployment transition, Huebner et al. (2007) claimed that “the only certainty about the deployment of a service member during war in an era of terrorism is uncertainty from beginning to end” (p. 113). Upon reentry, families must get to know each other all over again (Faber et al., 2008; Mmari et al., 2009), and they may be ambivalent about restoring intimacy due to fear of rejection, doubts about whether feelings have changed, or the possibility of subsequent deployment (Vormbrock, 1993). Moreover, partners are likely to encounter questions about when, what, and how much to discuss about their time apart (Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Merolla, 2010; Sahlstein et al., 2009). *RQ2* asks about the themes of relational uncertainty that military couples encounter upon reunion:

RQ2: What issues of relational uncertainty, if any, do military personnel and partners report experiencing during the post-deployment transition?

The relational turbulence model nominates interference from partners as a second mechanism that gives rise to turmoil when relationships are in flux. Following Berscheid (1983, 1991), the model proposes that individuals do not devote much conscious attention to accomplishing their everyday routines until a change makes them susceptible to interruptions. *Interference from partners* occurs when people interrupt each other’s routines in disruptive ways (“Why did you rearrange the furniture?”; “I didn’t know that

I have to drop the kids off at day camp this week.”). *Facilitation from partners* transpires when individuals interrupt in helpful ways (“How nice of you to pick up my prescription!”; “It’s so much easier to park my car now that you’ve cleaned the garage.”). The model argues that times of transition should result in more opportunities for interference from partners, and in turn, more relational turbulence.

Interference from partners may take different forms across dyadic domains. Scholarship on dating and marriage has focused on disruptions to people’s daily routines, leisure time, everyday schedules, and goals for diet, exercise, and entertainment (Knobloch, 2008b; Knobloch & Schmelzer, 2008; Theiss & Knobloch, 2009). Within the context of infertility, interference from partners can occur when selecting and acquiring medical care, scheduling intercourse around ovulation cycles, and defining each person’s role in pursuing pregnancy (Steuber & Solomon, 2008). Within the domain of breast cancer, individuals can encounter interference from partners in scheduling and receiving treatments, coping with side effects, securing support, and managing finances (Weber & Solomon, 2008).

No work has investigated the issues of interference from partners that are salient to military couples, but extant findings hint that the post-deployment transition is rife with potential disruptions to people’s daily routines (e.g., Doyle & Peterson, 2005; Faber et al., 2008; Mmari et al., 2009). Scholars have speculated that a primary task for military couples to accomplish upon reunion is renegotiating roles (Bowling & Sherman, 2008). At-home partners may have difficulty sharing decision-making power with returning service members (Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Gambardella, 2008). In turn, military personnel may no longer feel needed by their family, on the one hand, or overwhelmed by the household tasks that surfaced in their absence, on the other hand (Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Sayers et al., 2009; Wood et al., 1995). Military couples also may experience interference when one person is eager to talk about deployment experiences and the other person prefers privacy (Sahlstein et al., 2009). *RQ3* solicits information about interference from partners during the transition from deployment to reintegration:

RQ3: What kinds of interference from partners, if any, do military personnel and partners report experiencing during the post-deployment transition?

A final issue involves people’s demographic attributes as predictors of relationship changes (*RQ1*), relational uncertainty (*RQ2*), and interference from partners (*RQ3*) during the post-deployment transition. The relational turbulence model is silent about the role of people’s demographic attributes (e.g., Solomon et al., 2010), but scholarship on the post-deployment transition suggests three classes of variables that may be relevant: (a) characteristics of individuals (e.g., Wiens & Boss, 2006; Wood et al., 1995); (b) features of relationships (e.g., Sayers et al., 2009); and (c) aspects of the deployment itself (e.g., Renshaw et al., 2008; SteelFisher et al., 2008). In this first application of the relational turbulence model to the post-deployment transition, we consider two individual attributes (sex and age), two relationship attributes (marital status and relationship length), and five deployment characteristics (deployed versus at-home partner, military branch, active duty versus reserve status, length of deployment, and length of time the service member has been home). Of course, these variables are not the only demographic

features that may be germane, but they provide a starting point for contextualizing people's experiences. *RQ4* addresses the issue.

RQ4: How do people's demographic attributes predict their experiences of relationship change, relational uncertainty, and interference from partners?

Method

To gain insight into people's post-deployment experiences in their own words, we collected open-ended survey responses from U.S. service members and romantic partners. Individuals were recruited from January to March 2010 by (a) circulating advertisements to family readiness officers, chaplains, and military personnel across the country; (b) distributing flyers at reintegration workshops for returning service members; and (c) posting announcements on online forums devoted to military families. People were eligible to participate if (a) they were currently involved in a romantic relationship, (b) they or their romantic partner had returned home from deployment during the past six months, and (c) they had access to a secure and private internet connection. Participation was limited to one partner per couple.

The sample contained 259 individuals (111 males, 148 females) living in 30 U.S. states who responded to one or more of the open-ended items. Of these, 137 participants (53%; 109 males, 28 females) were in the military ($n = 24$ participants were part of a dual-career military couple), and 122 participants (47%; 2 males, 120 females) were partners of service members. With respect to deployment, 127 participants (49%; 109 males, 18 females) had returned home from deployment within the past six months ($n = 6$ participants were involved in a relationship in which both members had returned home from deployment within the past six months), and 132 participants (51%; 2 males, 130 females) were at-home partners.

Participants ranged in age from 19 to 58 years old ($Mdn = 32$ years, $M = 33.13$ years, $SD = 8.56$ years). Most individuals were Caucasian (84%); others were African American (7%), Hispanic (5%), Asian (2%), Native American (1%), and other (1%). People's romantic relationships averaged 9.68 years in length ($Mdn = 8$ years, $SD = 7.22$ years). Most were married (84%); others were casually dating (2%), seriously dating (8%), or engaged to be married (6%). The majority of participants lived together (91%), and 61% of participants had children.

The branches of military service represented in the sample included the U.S. National Guard (60%), the Army (32%), the Marines (4%), the Air Force (3%), and the Navy (1%). The military status of most service members was active duty (54%), followed by reserves (35%), inactive ready reserves (4%), discharged (1%), retired (1%), or other (5%). Their length of deployment averaged 11.46 months ($range = 2$ months to 24 months, $Mdn = 12$ months, $SD = 2.72$ months), and they had been home an average of 3.15 months ($range =$ less than one week to six months, $Mdn = 3$ months, $SD = 2.17$ months).

The online questionnaire began by soliciting demographic information. Next, open-ended items asked participants to describe changes to their relationship, relational

uncertainty, and interference from partners. After completing the questionnaire, individuals were invited to email a research account with a survey completion code and their residential mailing address to receive a US\$15 gift card from a national retailer. Data collection was anonymous such that people's identity could not be linked with their responses. The survey software was programmed to accept only one set of responses per computer IP address.

Results

We conducted a content analysis of the responses to each question by inductively deriving themes from the data (as per Neuendorf, 2002). As a first step, the authors and an outside observer reviewed the responses several times to become familiar with the data. Next, we engaged in open and axial coding to identify dominant categories (as per Strauss & Corbin, 1998). *Open coding* involves labeling and classifying concepts based on detailed readings of the data, and *axial coding* involves identifying linkages among subcategories of concepts. This process garnered 10 categories of relationship change (*RQ1*), seven categories of relational uncertainty (*RQ2*), and eight categories of interference from partners (*RQ3*).

The next task was to verify whether the categories that emerged from the content analysis were discernable to a lay audience. To that end, we unitized each participant's response to a question into thematic units (as per Krippendorff, 2004). A *thematic unit* conveys a single idea; it is a unit of analysis appropriate for freely-generated narrative text and ranges in length from one clause to several sentences (Krippendorff, 2004). During the unitizing process, responses that referenced multiple ideas were divided into separate thematic units. Participants wrote an average of 1.50 thematic units per question (*range* = 1 to 7 thematic units, *Mdn* = 1 thematic unit, *SD* = 0.84 thematic unit). We then trained three independent judges who were blind to the research questions to code the data into mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories (decisions from a fourth judge were excluded due to lack of consistency).

Krippendorff's (2004) α was calculated to evaluate reliability. Krippendorff's α is superior to other content analytic reliability measures because it (a) assesses agreement between any number of observers, (b) is independent of the distribution of categories, (c) generalizes across any level of measurement, and (d) possesses a computable sampling distribution (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). It ranges from 0.00 to 1.00, with $\alpha > .67$ denoting marginal reliability and $\alpha > .80$ representing satisfactory reliability (Krippendorff, 2004). Disagreements were resolved by selecting the category endorsed by the majority of judges.

Changes to the relationship (RQ1)

The open-ended item for *RQ1* read "In what ways, if any, did your relationship change after deployment compared to before deployment?" The item was adapted from interview protocols used with military families during and after deployment (Faber et al., 2008; Huebner et al., 2007; Newby et al., 2005). A total of 152 participants wrote 233 thematic units in response to the question. Of those, 211 thematic units (91%) were

substantive comments, and 22 thematic units (9%) indicated that no changes had occurred in the relationship. The content analysis of the substantive thematic units revealed 10 categories (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .81$; see Table 1).

Relationship is stronger. Responses in this category indicated that participants feel closer and more committed to each other ($n = 38$ thematic units, 18.0% of the substantive thematic units). Examples include (a) "We were best of friends but communication and closeness change. This deployment we found our way back to each other and things are better than they have ever been; we're adjusting but now know we want to be together no matter how tough things get, we can't shut each other out." (deployed National Guard husband, 45 years old); (b) "Our relationship has gotten so much stronger since he left for Iraq. Spending this time apart has brought us closer and strengthened our marriage. He is still the same man he was before he left." (at-home National Guard wife, 26 years old); and (c) "Deployment in many ways brought us closer together. It helped me realize I could handle things on my own, but also helped us both see how much we depend on each other for emotional support." (at-home Army wife, 39 years old). In sum, some participants enjoyed greater resiliency in their relationship after deployment.

Value the relationship more. These comments emphasized that deployment helped participants appreciate their partner more and value their time together more ($n = 31$ thematic units; 14.7%). Examples include (a) "While deployed I realized what I have been blessed with in life, so when returning home, I have a greater appreciation and realization of that." (deployed National Guard husband, 27 years old); (b) "Emotionally our relationship changed a lot I think. I also think that we both matured over the time and being apart made us realize what was important to us." (deployed and engaged National Guard male, 21 years old); and (c) "It made me appreciate the little things she did for me that I overlooked before I left." (deployed and engaged Army male, 20 years old). As per the adage that absence makes the heart grow fonder, separation during a tour of duty may remind people not to take their relationship for granted.

Problems reconnecting. This theme encompassed comments about feeling detached, isolated, or distant from family members ($n = 25$ thematic units; 11.8%). Responses emphasized seclusion and separation from loved ones. Examples include (a) "Become more distant from children and wife. Sometimes they are scared of me, sometimes they hate me. I am unaware of any changes other than that. But my family says I am different." (deployed National Guard husband, 30 years old); (b) "He takes the children's rejection more personally." (at-home Army wife, 25 years old); and (c) "There was a little trouble reconnecting when I got home. I wasn't used to having orders questioned... it was very frustrating for both of us." (deployed Marine husband, 32 years old). A striking feature of these comments is that participants appeared to be caught off guard by their struggles to rejuvenate family bonds.

Difficulty communicating. Responses here reflected problems sharing information, regulating privacy, and comforting each other ($n = 23$ thematic units; 10.9%). In contrast to the previous category, these comments focused on people's verbal and nonverbal

Table 1. Changes to the relationship*1. Relationship is stronger*

"We became much closer. Now, as we are closer and able to spend more time with each other, there are a lot of worries taken off my chest." (deployed Marine husband, 25 years old)

"It seems stronger. The small stuff isn't as important anymore." (deployed National Guard husband, 36 years old)

"During the first few weeks home the relationship is in a honeymoon stage. You are so happy to be together again you are just thrilled." (at-home National Guard wife, 29 years old)

2. Value the relationship more

"After being through that stressful of a situation, we both learned to appreciate each other more." (at-home Marine wife, 21 years old)

"Love small things, do not take things for granted." (deployed National Guard husband, 55 years old)

"He came back cherishing our relationship and our love much more than before so we were able to work through our problems easily." (at-home National Guard wife, 31 years old)

3. Problems reconnecting

"It is hard to get back in the groove with our family. I feel distant from my wife." (deployed National Guard husband, 34 years old)

"He cherishes family, but finds it hard to relax and have fun and interact with us. That in turn makes fewer fun times, because there is emotional strain." (deployed wife, branch not reported, part of a dual-deployed couple, 36 years old)

"My husband was not very responsive or helpful in understanding our first child's new needs, and was not supportive in my efforts to get her the help she needed. He is frustrated (and frustrating) because he doesn't know his children or me as well as he should." (at-home National Guard wife, 37 years old)

4. Difficulty communicating

"Communication: Less thoughtful, very mundane. Not as expressive. He got used to not having anyone to talk to or share things / ideas with . . . just got used to doing things on his own!" (at-home wife, branch not reported, part of a dual-career military couple, 37 years old)

"Re-establishing communication. Getting to know each other again." (deployed Army husband, 29 years old)

"After my deployment, we often had communication issues." (deployed National Guard husband, 35 years old)

5. Increased autonomy

"We became individuals during deployment, more independent upon ourselves instead of each other. We grew as individuals, so we had to get to know one another again upon his return." (at-home National Guard wife, 31 years old)

"I am less dependent on him and am more confident in my abilities." (at-home Army wife, 36 years old)

"Before the deployment the relationship felt like a collaboration. Since the deployment it feels as if one person does everything and is in charge. It also feels like all the decision making is put on the shoulders of the person who was not deployed." (at-home National Guard wife, 25 years old)

6. Changes in finances and employment

"There has been frustration over money spent while my husband was deployed, but he explained he is frustrated and is trying not to make a huge deal out of it." (at-home wife, branch not reported, part of a dual-career military couple, 25 years old)

"My spouse took on more responsibilities with finances." (deployed Marine husband, 31 years old)

"We had a few disagreements about money." (deployed National Guard husband, 35 years old)

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)**7. Changes in sexual behavior**

"Spouse is having difficulty being intimate with me." (deployed Army husband, 35 years old)

"Our sex life has dropped dramatically. It is like we are really good friends." (deployed wife, branch not reported, part of a dual-deployed couple, 32 years old)

"With the children gone our sex life is much more active and fulfilling." (deployed Army husband, 45 years old)

8. Problems reintegrating the service member into daily life

"I had a routine that I followed every day for a year and now it's interrupted." (at-home National Guard wife, 39 years old)

"The relationship got harder due to I wasn't here when she needed my help the most. I changed, did my own thing and she was stuck here taking care of the children. Although she won't openly say it, there is resentment towards me and I am trying to make things better but they are becoming stressful." (deployed National Guard husband, 30 years old)

"I have become set in my schedule with our daughter who was born 24 hours prior to his deployment. And he tends to interrupt that schedule." (at-home National Guard wife, 28 years old)

9. Heightened conflict

"We argue a lot and I feel as if it's my fault most of the time." (deployed Army husband, 32 years old)

"I know I have a much shorter temper than in the past." (deployed National Guard husband, 44 years old)

"We argue and fight all the time, and now it's not just over simple things, we fight about everything." (at-home National Guard wife, 41 years old)

10. Separation or divorce

"Within three weeks after returning from deployment he moved out. He is not interested in me at all." (at-home National Guard wife, 30 years old)

"We almost got divorced after he came back home but are working through things." (at-home National Guard wife, 33 years old)

"We just began marital counseling yesterday to work on communication and infidelity that has happened during the pre-deployment." (deployed National Guard husband, 33 years old)

N = 211 substantive thematic units.

behavior within conversation. Examples include (a) "He seems very closed off. Doesn't share anything with me. We don't talk about us." (at-home National Guard wife, 40 years old); (b) "Forgets that I am home now and need to have more information regarding what is going on." (deployed National Guard husband, 39 years old); and (c) "We both had no idea how to comfort or console or even talk about what happened." (at-home National Guard wife, 40 years old). Many of these statements depicted disagreement about the optimal degree of openness between partners.

Increased autonomy. These comments stated that partners grew more confident and self-reliant (*n* = 22 thematic units; 10.4%). Examples include (a) "My partner became more independent." (deployed Army husband, 35 years old); (b) "I learned not to rely on him so much. I tend to do everything myself because that is what I did for a year. I was used to being alone and now he's home and it seems like he's in my way." (at-home National

Guard wife, 39 years old); and (c) "I am more independent but I have to make sure that he knows that I still need him in the same things as before the deployment. This includes needing his help emotionally . . . while he was gone, I had to figure out how to do it all on my own, including getting through a pregnancy." (at-home Navy wife, 22 years old). Almost inevitably, the demands of separation may compel individuals to become more self-sufficient.

Changes in finances and employment. Some participants mentioned money issues and career choices ($n = 20$ thematic units; 9.5%). Examples include (a) "I had to take over more of the financial aspects of our household, so it made our relationship more tense. He wasn't in control of the money anymore, and he felt like he had to ask me for every little thing." (at-home National Guard wife, 36 years old); (b) "Husband was not ready to return to his previous job, which would have required him to be away from home and work long hours, therefore he accepted a job earning less than half of what he was earning before he deployed. It has caused some stress and major lifestyle adjustments." (at-home National Guard wife, 49 years old); and (c) "Financially we make less than we did when I was deployed, causing problems." (deployed National Guard husband, 34 years old). The stress of financial and employment problems may take a toll during reunion.

Changes in sexual behavior. Comments here noted changes in physical intimacy and affection ($n = 16$ thematic units; 7.6%). Examples include (a) "Sex life has decreased severely." (deployed National Guard husband, 30 years old); (b) "Sex: more of it . . . went without for so long." (at-home wife, branch not reported, part of a dual-career military couple, 37 years old); (c) "We are often mentally off sexually, so it is not as enjoyable as it was before." (deployed Army husband, 39 years old); (d) "Hesitation to be intimate with one another." (deployed Army wife, 50 years old); and (e) "We are more affectionate." (deployed National Guard wife, 36 years old). Approximately 40% of the thematic units depicted more frequent or fulfilling sexual activity, and 60% mentioned less frequent or satisfying sexual activity.

Problems reintegrating the service member into daily life. These responses identified struggles readjusting everyday routines ($n = 12$ thematic units; 5.7%). Examples include (a) "She does not want to let me back into her world for fear I may leave her alone again." (deployed Army husband, 35 years old); (b) "My husband wants to cling to me. I find it very uncomfortable. Before the deployment we kind of did our own thing. I drive 200+ miles for work every day, and now that I'm back to work and driving again, he has a hard time seeing me leave, and when I arrive home he wants my immediate attention." (deployed National Guard wife, 43 years old); and (c) "The only thing that is irritating is that I'm used to just doing things around the house, and he's trying to help but I can do it faster myself. Just smile and work around him." (at-home National Guard wife, 40 years old). These comments underscore the difficulty of incorporating the deployed family member back into the household.

Heightened conflict. Responses categorized here focused on increased hostility, resentment, and arguing ($n = 12$ thematic units; 5.7%). Examples include (a) "Fighting got

worse.” (deployed National Guard husband, 34 years old); (b) “I became jumpy and I angered quicker. Not dangerous but just irritable.” (deployed National Guard husband, 51 years old); (c) “Increased irritability and anger issues.” (deployed National Guard husband, 30 years old); and (d) “He returned home an angry man who didn’t understand why his angel baby had turned into a special-needs four-year-old or how to deal with her. He is actually better after this deployment than the last time, but his anger is still there and his patience is short. Very short for noise, things out of place, and the rigors of unstructured life with children. Things overall are not good right now.” (at-home National Guard wife, 37 years old). Military couples may experience more intense or more frequent conflict during reunion, with at least some of the arguments stemming from increased agitation on the part of the deployed partner.

Separation or divorce. Comments in this category mentioned that individuals were considering ending their relationship ($n = 12$ thematic units; 5.7%). Examples include (a) “Two weeks after my husband returned, the trust in our relationship was gone. He had done things with another woman while deployed so we are no longer going to remain in our relationship.” (at-home Army wife, 25 years old); (b) “Received a ‘Dear John’ email just prior to returning home. She met someone on the internet and is now living with him.” (deployed Navy husband, 44 years old); and (c) “We are now separated and living apart. Most likely will be getting divorced within the year.” (at-home Army wife, 30 years old). For these couples, the post-deployment transition was a time to contemplate terminating their relationship.

Relational uncertainty (RQ2)

The open-ended item for *RQ2* was taken from work that sought to identify the themes of relational uncertainty within marriage (Knobloch, 2008a). The item read: “It is normal for romantic partners to have questions about their relationship. People can experience uncertainty about their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. They can have questions about their partner’s thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. They can be unsure about the nature of the relationship itself. Please list and briefly describe issues of uncertainty you experienced when you/your partner returned from deployment (after you were reunited).” In response, 225 participants wrote a total of 351 thematic units: 314 (89%) were substantive, and 37 (11%) specified that no relational uncertainty issues surfaced during reunion. The content analysis identified seven categories (Krippendorff’s $\alpha = .84$; see Table 2).

Commitment. Many participants wrote about issues of intimacy, connection, and maintaining the relationship into the future ($n = 60$ thematic units; 19.1% of the substantive thematic units). Examples include (a) “Uncertain that we can keep our marriage together.” (deployed Army husband, 35 years old); (b) “I was unsure if he felt the same way about me, or if he had begun to move on from me and wanted to start a different life.” (deployed and engaged National Guard female, 21 years old); (c) “Figuring out how to be a couple again.” (at-home National Guard wife, 21 years old); (d) “Although I was glad that he was home, I was uncertain and fearful that I had lost any loving feeling

Table 2. Relational uncertainty**1. Commitment**

“Whether or not feelings would be there still.” (deployed Army husband, 24 years old)

“Can we stay together after being apart for so long?” (at-home National Guard wife, 21 years old)

“Whether our marriage was strong enough to come back from it.” (at-home National Guard wife, 25 years old)

2. Reintegration

“Can he go back to a regular civilian life?” (at-home National Guard wife, 39 years old)

“Will we be able to readjust?” (deployed Marine husband, 24 years old)

“Things were different. He was used to hanging around with his boys and never really being around a girl. Before his deployment he used to treat me like a lady (i.e., always hold my hand, give me his jacket if I was cold, never say anything rude in front of me, and never spit). He was just not used to having someone else to take care of.” (at-home National Guard female involved in a serious dating relationship, 23 years old)

3. Household stressors

“How to react to my children. I don’t want to be too easy on them . . . but I haven’t seen them for so long. I want to know where I fit into my household. I feel like an outsider.” (deployed Army husband, 31 years old)

“Whether he would do the things he promised and help me out more when he returned. He did not.” (at-home Army wife, 30 years old)

“Will she give me back some of the household responsibility?” (deployed Marine husband, 24 years old)

“While he was gone, I handled all of the discipline for our preschool-aged son. When he returned, our son didn’t want to accept discipline from him, because he was used to me being his only parent for so long. I felt uncertain about how we would cope with co-parenting our child effectively.” (at-home Army wife, 39 years old)

4. Personality changes

“Getting to know each other again.” (deployed National Guard husband, part of a dual-deployed couple, 49 years old)

“Will my partner gradually change after being home, when his experiences set in and he thinks about them?” (at-home and engaged National Guard female, 22 years old)

“Thought that we could possibly both have changed in a negative way.” (deployed National Guard husband, 36 years old)

“I was worried that what went on overseas would affect his personality, and he would come back a different person.” (at-home National Guard wife, 29 years old)

5. Sexual behavior and infidelity

“Unfaithfulness – did it occur?” (deployed Army wife, 50 years old)

“Wondering if he would still find me attractive.” (at-home Army wife, 41 years old)

“Can we be intimate again without feeling awkward?” (at-home National Guard wife, 39 years old)

6. Service member’s health

“Anxiety – his anxiety level was substantially higher than before deployment.” (at-home National Guard wife, 30 years old)

“I was worried about dreams or unexpected behaviors resulting from his deployment experiences.” (at-home National Guard wife, 27 years old)

“I was injured while deployed so we have been dealing with my recovery.” (deployed and engaged Army male, 46 years old)

(continued)

Table 2 (continued)*7. Communication*

"It was mostly the fact that he couldn't really share with me what it was like. It's just not something I can understand." (at-home National Guard wife, 36 years old)

"We needed to talk to each other & listen to each other!!" (at-home National Guard wife, 45 years old)

"Talking was an issue. He was very quiet, almost distracted." (at-home National Guard wife, 47 years old)

N = 314 substantive thematic units.

toward him. I felt nothing." (at-home National Guard wife, 37 years old); (e) "Does he love me just as much as before? He wasn't as romantic as he used to be." (at-home Army wife, 20 years old); (f) "Will our marriage survive?" (at-home Army wife, 23 years old); and (g) "Uncertain if feelings were still the same." (deployed Army female involved in a casual dating relationship, 43 years old). Consistent with prior work explicating the three sources of relational uncertainty (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999), the statements reflected self-focused, partner-focused, and relationship-focused ambiguity.

Reintegration. A second theme articulated questions about redefining roles, adjusting to living together again, and fitting into the family (*n* = 58 thematic units; 18.5%). Examples include (a) "How long will it take to transition from military life to civilian life?" (at-home Army husband, 29 years old); (b) "My husband felt like he didn't fit in and was not needed in the family initially." (at-home Army wife, 36 years old); (c) "We had to redefine our roles." (at-home Army wife, 38 years old); (d) "How life was going to be when I got back. I wish I was still in the Gulf – feel more comfortable there than in the United States. Maybe this is normal for someone who has fought the war for over three years." (deployed National Guard husband, 44 years old); (e) "Is he adjusting to civilian life alright?" (deployed National Guard wife, part of a dual-deployed couple, 23 years old); and (f) "I worried about what it would be like having him home and part of the routine again – where did he fit in?" (at-home Army wife, 28 years old). These responses depicted the uncertainty of rediscovering people's place in the family.

Household stressors. Some participants noted questions about managing their household, including concerns about children, finances, and career options (*n* = 50 thematic units; 15.9%). Whereas comments in the previous category focused on integrating the deployed partner into family life, responses in this category centered around the pragmatic activities of caring for a home and children. Examples include (a) "I didn't know if he would take responsibility for all that needed to be done, like take care of finding us a house, car, etc." (at-home National Guard wife, 19 years old); (b) "I was concerned if my two boys were going to remember me and understand. They were 21 months when I returned home and both took to me great." (deployed National Guard husband, 27 years old); (c) "Disciplining the children was an area of uncertainty for me upon returning home. Being in the military, all aspects of the job are strict and regimented. I cannot expect my children to follow that pattern 100% of the time. Plus, my wife has her own

discipline style and enforced it on her own for a year. I had to adapt to that, as well.” (deployed National Guard husband, 35 years old); and (d) “Financial issues. We were supposed to be climbing out of a hole and instead we got further in it.” (deployed National Guard husband, 30 years old). The responses in this category, which reflect ambiguity about an array of domestic obligations, imply that military couples may grapple with questions about how to meet the demands of running their household.

Personality changes. These comments asked whether people’s personalities shifted during the separation ($n = 47$ thematic units; 15.0%). Examples include (a) “That she was the same person – that she didn’t change because she had to be the ‘pants of the house.’” (deployed Marine husband, 25 years old); (b) “Questioned whether he would still be the same personality-wise.” (at-home Army wife, 43 years old); (c) “Neither of us are the same people.” (deployed Army husband, 39 years old); (d) “Main issue was that it was not the honeymoon I expected. It was sort of like having a stranger show up to move in.” (at-home Army wife, 38 years old); and (e) “I didn’t really know him anymore, he had changed so much. I had also changed and we don’t know how to deal with each other.” (at-home National Guard wife, 41 years old). In sum, individuals wondered how their experiences during deployment had transformed them.

Sexual behavior and infidelity. Responses in this category referenced dyadic and extra-dyadic sexual intimacy, including physical attraction, faithfulness, and trust ($n = 45$ thematic units; 14.3%). Examples include (a) “Sexual chemistry... still the same?” (deployed National Guard male involved in a serious dating relationship, 25 years old); (b) “I was uncertain about her faithfulness to our relationship.” (deployed National Guard husband, 35 years old); (c) “Issues came up about me having affairs while I was deployed. She began to check my cell phone to see who I called/texted and accused me of having affairs.” (deployed Army husband, 36 years old); (d) “He watched a lot of porn while on deployment and would spend time with that before being romantic with me.” (at-home Army female, part of a seriously dating, dual-career military couple, 23 years old); (e) “Is she still attracted to me?” (deployed Army husband, 26 years old); and (f) “He wanted to be intimate right away and I felt pressured to push it more quickly than I was ready. It is hard when you have been celibate for so long to jump right back into it.” (deployed Army wife, part of a dual-career military couple, 30 years old). These statements denoted questions about whether sexual intimacy would be comparable and whether partners were monogamous during their time apart.

Service member’s health. Questions about the well-being and safety of the deployed partner were classified into this category ($n = 37$ thematic units; 11.8%). Examples include (a) “Why am I acting like a mad man? Why am I always so angry and depressed?” (deployed Army husband, 32 years old); (b) “Will I have nightmares?” (deployed Marine husband, 24 years old); (c) “I thought about PTSD, depression, and alcohol abuse – would he be affected by any of these extremely common issues of recently returned soldiers?” (at-home Army wife, 28 years old); and (d) “Alcohol – was drinking heavily until I pointed it out.” (at-home National Guard wife, 28 years old). The physical and emotional strains of deployment may generate uncertainty about the service

member's well-being, particularly in terms of sleep disturbances, depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, and substance abuse.

Communication. This theme focused on the amount and quality of communication between partners, including issues of privacy, information-seeking and sharing, and understanding each other's experiences ($n = 17$ thematic units; 5.4%). The responses centered on openness in talking about attitudes and feelings. Examples include (a) "Communication. He wanted to know all about the deployment and I wanted to forget it." (deployed Air Force wife, 39 years old); (b) "Will we be able to talk to one another the same?" (deployed Marine husband, 24 years old); and (c) "The biggest uncertainty I had was if I was asking too many questions." (at-home National Guard wife, 31 years old). Hence, individuals may entertain questions about how much information to reveal about their time apart.

Interference from partners (RQ3)

RQ3 was assessed by an open-ended item adapted from previous work on interference from partners (Knobloch & Solomon, 2004; Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). It read: "Sometimes, partners get in each other's way – they make it harder for each other to accomplish goals. It's normal for couples to interfere in each other's everyday routines and activities once in awhile. Please list and briefly describe ways in which your partner has made it harder for you to complete your everyday activities since you have been reunited after deployment." In response, 223 participants wrote a total of 314 thematic units: 255 (81%) were substantive, and 59 (19%) indicated no issues of interference from partners. Eight categories emerged from the content analysis (Krippendorff's $\alpha = .81$; see Table 3).

Everyday routines. A first theme involved general references to changes in people's daily schedules, along with specific references to adjustments in eating, sleeping, exercising, and watching television ($n = 69$ thematic units; 27.1% of the substantive thematic units). Examples include (a) "Had a routine and now do not, so learning to relax and enjoy is hard, but trying." (deployed National Guard husband, 55 years old); (b) "The only thing is that I have to keep up a well-maintained fitness record. So finding the time to get that needed exercise and still be home in time for dinner and family time is difficult." (deployed Marine husband, 25 years old); (c) "I can see she is used to me being gone and doesn't seem to know quite what to do with me home." (deployed Army husband, 24 years old); (d) "I've had to adjust my sleeping pattern. He likes to stay up late; I like to go to bed early." (at-home National Guard wife, 19 years old); (e) "Just got used to being on my own and takes some time realizing someone else needs time in the morning to use the shower." (at-home Army wife, 43 years old); and (f) "He eats junk food and I had started eating more healthy while he was gone, but now we have more junk food in the house. I think he just went with the flow before but now demands pop tarts, cheez-its, white bread, 2% cheese. Nothing is wholewheat, organic, or fat-free. So I have gone from 138 lbs to 155 lbs since he has been home." (at-home and engaged female, branch not reported, part of a dual-career military couple, 28 years old). The post-deployment

Table 3. Interference from partners*1. Everyday routines*

"He keeps me up later since he is not working and I don't get much sleep. He is using the TV all the time and I have a hard time getting to watch my shows. He is not used to my routine so he wants to do something and I already have my normal stuff to do." (at-home Army wife, 27 years old)

"Getting in and out of the bathroom in a hurry was hard as he moves much slower than I do.

Getting ready to go anywhere took longer as he was not on an internal time crunch to get anywhere." (at-home National Guard wife, 39 years old)

"During deployment I was able to complete tasks on my time schedule, anytime of the day or night that I felt they needed to be done. Since returning I feel somewhat interfered with since I have to take into account my wife's schedule, agenda, and priorities, which don't always completely align with mine." (deployed National Guard husband, 32 years old)

"I got very used to functioning as single, yet married, with my own routine from morning TV channels, workout routines, and meals." (at-home Army wife, 47 years old)

2. Household chores

"I know there are 100 things that were neglected around the house while I was gone." (deployed Army husband, 32 years old)

"It was one more mouth to feed and one more set of clothes to wash. Seriously it was like having another kid to take care of." (at-home Army wife, 38 years old)

"He is obsessive compulsive about the house but he can't lift a finger to help." (at-home National Guard female involved in a serious dating relationship, 28 years old)

"I used to be able to get my chores done and be done . . . now feel like I'm forever cleaning up the mess in the kitchen or doing laundry . . . I feel like I've become a maid some days instead of a wife and mother." (at-home National Guard wife, 28 years old)

3. Control issues

"She kinda acts still in charge of the house as if I was still gone." (deployed National Guard husband, 48 years old)

"He questions everything and has been poking around, checking to see where I moved stuff in the past year." (at-home National Guard wife, 33 years old)

"I noticed I nagged about minor things, chores, the way he folded the clothes, or cooked the rice . . . and I would suggest, why didn't he do it this way? Not realizing he has made it work for nine months, I need to let him complete the task his way." (deployed National Guard wife, 27 years old)

4. Feeling smothered

"He wants to be with me all the time now to make up for the time he's been gone." (at-home Army wife, 39 years old)

"Having ANY alone time to unwind and just . . . be." (at-home National Guard wife, 25 years old)

"She is needy – wants me to spend all of my time with her." (deployed National Guard male involved in a casual dating relationship, 40 years old)

5. Parenting

"I had my own way of doing things with our kids while he was gone and he wanted to come in and change it all." (at-home National Guard wife, age not reported)

"Disciplining the children when they did something wrong, and she overstepped her bounds when I corrected them." (deployed National Guard husband, 30 years old)

"He actually said to me one day that I leave him at home everyday to BABYSIT his own child while I go out to do my own thing. Could not believe he said that to me." (at-home National Guard wife, 39 years old)

(continued)

Table 3 (continued)**6. Partner differences**

"He complains that I have changed since he has been gone." (at-home National Guard wife, 21 years old)

"We are different." (deployed Army husband, 45 years old)

"He did become a bit more withdrawn." (at-home Army wife, 39 years old)

7. Social networks and social activities

"I am a pretty sociable person. When he was gone, I spent a lot of time with friends and their kids. Upon his return, I felt like I had to curtail my social activities somewhat because he didn't want to be around a lot of people." (at-home Army wife, 39 years old)

"It's hard to go see my family and friends, which I did a lot before I left, because he always thinks I'm going to go meet guys." (deployed and engaged female, branch not reported, part of a dual-deployed couple, 37 years old)

"He is supposed to be home and isn't. Our kids don't understand, I don't understand, no one around understands – and they are all after me for the answers. I've missed him and dreamed of being reunited with him for a whole year only to have him CHOOSE to be gone now." (at-home National Guard wife, 30 years old)

8. Not enough time together

"I have found that I am letting the house cleaning get out of hand because I want to spend all my time with my partner." (at-home National Guard wife, 27 years old)

"Wanting to spend more time together." (at-home National Guard wife, 30 years old)

"The only problem is that we want to spend all of our time together so sometimes activities and chores, etc., get pushed back." (at-home Army wife, 20 years old)

N = 255 substantive thematic units.

transition may be marked by a variety of mundane disruptions to people's day-to-day activities, which, as anticipated by Berscheid (1983, 1991), may be quite upsetting for people.

Household chores. These comments mentioned problems completing housework and frustrations over unequal distribution of labor ($n = 50$ thematic units; 19.6%). Responses focused on pragmatic tasks such as laundry, cleaning, and meal preparation. Examples include (a) "I am working hard around the house but it doesn't seem good enough. I feel she thinks I OWE her." (deployed Army husband, 31 years old); (b) "Who takes out the trash. Cleaning up the home. All basic tasks." (at-home Army wife, 27 years old); (c) "He had no problem returning ALL of the household chores I used to handle before I deployed, which he had to handle during my deployment. I expected to now share them." (deployed Army wife, 50 years old); (d) "It's harder to keep the house clean with his stuff everywhere." (at-home National Guard wife, 33 years old); and (e) "I would say that being in the military has made me a very organized and neat individual. By no means am I saying that my wife doesn't work hard – but she is definitely not as tidy as I am. So since being home I'm trying to clean the house back up to the way it looked before I left. She just doesn't have the same drive as me so she will complain sometimes when I'm working on it, which I feel is getting in my way." (deployed National Guard husband, 29 years old). People may perceive interference in dividing chores and resentment over inequality.

Control issues. Some responses emphasized trouble sharing decision-making power ($n = 36$ thematic units; 14.1%). Examples include (a) “Power struggles. I am used to being in charge of several men . . . so it is giving up some of that power and authority with her.” (deployed National Guard male involved in a serious dating relationship, 25 years old); (b) “I have to clear the daily things I do with him now.” (at-home Army wife, 30 years old); (c) “It’s hard to give up the responsibilities that I took on while he was gone.” (at-home Army female involved in a serious dating relationship, 23 years old); (d) “She orders me around and tells me this is how things are done in the house. But it is MY house too and she doesn’t seem to get that.” (deployed Army husband, 31 years old); and (e) “I am used to being in charge and so is she, so sometimes we butt heads.” (deployed National Guard husband, 46 years old). In sum, interference from partners may emerge when individuals are unwilling to redistribute the autonomy they had grown accustomed to during deployment.

Feeling smothered. This category included comments about having no alone time, lacking privacy, and the partner being overly dependent ($n = 31$ thematic units; 12.2%). Examples include (a) “My spouse wants all of my attention.” (deployed Army husband, 39 years old); (b) “He wanted to be at my side 24/7. I needed to return to work after a few days off. He would ask me to stay home from work.” (at-home National Guard wife, 42 years old); (c) “She is constantly wanting to spend time with me.” (deployed Army husband, 32 years old); and (d) “He wants to spend every minute of every second with me. I do not have any alone time or time to myself.” (at-home and engaged National Guard female, 22 years old). Acting clingy or needy is an understandable reaction to reunion after deployment, but some people may feel suffocated by their partner’s constant desire to be together.

Parenting. Responses that mentioned problems caring for children were assigned here ($n = 23$ thematic units; 9.0%). Examples include (a) “We didn’t agree on after-school activities and study time’s importance.” (deployed Air Force wife, 39 years old); (b) “Since I have been home, she has been wanting me to take care of our son more so she can have her time.” (deployed National Guard husband, 20 years old); and (c) “He doesn’t know when the kids’ doctor’s office is open and when it closes. He doesn’t know how to effectively discipline our children and gets in my way when I am trying to do it. He has a hard time stepping in to parent because he just doesn’t know what to do.” (at-home National Guard wife, 37 years old). Unshared expectations for childcare may leave parents vulnerable to disruptions.

Partner differences. Comments in this category stated that people’s personalities changed during deployment ($n = 19$ thematic units; 7.4%). Examples include (a) “I have always been very independent, but since I got home, my husband has treated me more so like an invalid, like I have PTSD and am liable to break down at any second. It is very frustrating.” (deployed wife, branch not reported, 21 years old); (b) “Lack of patience for both parties. Different interests.” (at-home National Guard wife, 30 years old); and (c) “He has brought hostility to the house. He gets angry for no reason and then takes it out on me and the children. He is either angry and screaming or asleep. The house has

become a war zone.” (at-home Army wife, 25 years old). Changes to people’s personalities may contribute to interference because their behavior upon reunion does not mirror their behavior before deployment.

Social networks and social activities. This theme involved disruptions to people’s social lives ($n = 16$ thematic units; 6.3%). Examples include (a) “Never letting me have a social life with friends.” (deployed Army male involved in a serious dating relationship, 20 years old); (b) “I feel like I deserve to go out socially quite a bit since getting home.” (deployed Army female involved in a casual dating relationship, 43 years old); and (c) “Since he has been back, he places guilt on me if I want to meet up with friends after work or go shopping. Things I could not do alone without my son while he was gone for a year. I do not think I should be treated like a bad mother for wanting to do something every once in a while, particularly since I was not the one absent for a year.” (at-home Army wife, 30 years old). Both service members and at-home partners noted tension in negotiating the appropriate amount of time to spend on outside activities. These divergent expectations may generate interference from partners.

Not enough time together. A final theme centered around people’s desire to forego their daily routines to be with their partner ($n = 11$ thematic units; 4.3%). Examples include (a) “I have not been to the gym once since he has returned. I am so excited that he is home, the gym fell off.” (at-home wife, branch not reported, part of a dual-career military couple, 27 years old); (b) “We want to spend all of our time together so the housework goes undone.” (at-home National Guard wife, 36 years old); and (c) “I don’t want to clean up at night, now I just want to spend time with him. It makes it hard to go to work on days when he has off.” (at-home Army wife, 23 years old). In contrast to the theme of feeling smothered, this category highlights people’s unwillingness to resume their everyday activities after the excitement of reunion. Disruptions may occur when people eschew less desirable tasks, such as exercise and household chores, to spend quality time together.

Demographic attributes (RQ4)

RQ4 asked whether people’s post-deployment experiences varied according to their demographic attributes. We tested *RQ4* using chi-square analyses for the categorical variables (sex, marital status, deployed versus at-home partner, military branch, active duty versus reserve status) and independent samples *t*-tests for the continuous variables (age, relationship length, deployment length, length of time home).

As a first step, we evaluated whether the demographic attributes differentiated between participants who reported none versus at least one issue of relationship change (*RQ1*), relational uncertainty (*RQ2*), or interference from partners (*RQ3*). Findings for *RQ1* revealed that participants were more likely to note a change in their relationship when they experienced a longer deployment ($M = 11.66$ months, $SD = 2.75$ months) compared to a shorter deployment ($M = 10.32$ months, $SD = 2.92$ months), $t(150) = 2.10, p = .037$. Results for *RQ2* demonstrated that participants were less likely to report an issue of relational uncertainty when service members held active duty status

compared to reserve status, $\chi^2(1, n = 206) = 6.74, p = .009$. Individuals were more likely to mention an issue of relational uncertainty when service members were home for a longer time ($M = 3.41$ months, $SD = 2.17$ months) compared to a shorter time ($M = 1.76$ months, $SD = 1.69$ months), $t(217) = 5.02, p < .001$. For *RQ3*, women were more likely than men, $\chi^2(1, n = 223) = 4.00, p = .045$, and at-home partners were more likely than deployed partners, $\chi^2(1, n = 223) = 4.22, p = .040$, to report an issue of interference from partners.

We also examined whether the demographic attributes predicted people's likelihood of reporting particular categories. Results for *RQ1* indicated that when service members held active duty status compared to reserve status, participants were less likely to report changes in finances and employment, $\chi^2(1, n = 144) = 4.84, p = .028$, heightened conflict, $\chi^2(1, n = 144) = 4.27, p = .039$, and separation or divorce, $\chi^2(1, n = 144) = 4.27, p = .039$. Participants were more likely to report heightened conflict when service members were home for a longer time ($M = 4.92$ months, $SD = 1.57$ months) compared to a shorter time ($M = 3.10$ months, $SD = 2.22$ months), $t(147) = 3.70, p = .002$. With respect to *RQ2*, women were more likely than men to note relational uncertainty about sexual behavior and infidelity, $\chi^2(1, n = 225) = 4.35, p = .037$, and the service member's health, $\chi^2(1, n = 225) = 8.57, p = .003$. At-home partners were more likely than deployed partners to report relational uncertainty about the service member's health, $\chi^2(1, n = 225) = 13.87, p < .001$. Findings for *RQ3* showed that women were more likely than men to report disruptions to their everyday routines, $\chi^2(1, n = 223) = 7.02, p = .008$. Similarly, at-home partners were more likely than deployed partners to mention disruptions to everyday routines, $\chi^2(1, n = 223) = 13.92, p < .001$, and interference over not enough time together, $\chi^2(1, n = 223) = 6.41, p = .011$. People were more likely to report disruptions due to partner differences when service members were home for a longer time ($M = 4.43$ months, $SD = 2.32$ months) compared to a shorter time ($M = 2.97$ months, $SD = 2.14$ months), $t(216) = 2.84, p = .005$.

Discussion

This investigation employed the relational turbulence model to shed light on the experiences of U.S. service members and at-home partners during the post-deployment transition. On a theoretical level, the study is unique for moving the relational turbulence model into a new context. It also contributes to the literature on military couples by (a) illuminating how people's relationships changed in their own words, and (b) highlighting relational uncertainty and interference from partners as mechanisms that may play a role during the post-deployment transition. On a methodological level, it adds to extant work by (a) attending to the views of both service members and at-home partners, (b) acquiring a geographically diverse sample of participants living in 30 states, and (c) pairing qualitative and quantitative data.

The findings revealed both opportunities and challenges facing military couples during the post-deployment transition. On the positive side, some individuals indicated that their partnership grew closer or they valued their relationship more (33% of the substantive thematic units for *RQ1*). Neutral outcomes also were evident: Some participants reported no changes to their relationship (9% of the thematic units for *RQ1*), no issues of

relational uncertainty (11% of the thematic units for *RQ2*), and no interference from partners (19% of the thematic units for *RQ3*). Whereas previous work has focused on the negative effects of deployment on relational well-being (Nelson Goff et al., 2007; SteelFisher et al., 2008), particularly via the experience of post-traumatic stress disorder (e.g., Renshaw et al., 2008), our results imply that the cycle of deployment and reunion can furnish some positive outcomes for military couples (see also Karney & Crown, 2011; Newby et al., 2005; Wood et al., 1995).

Challenges were apparent as well. Participants identified eight other changes to their relationship: problems reconnecting, difficulty communicating, increased autonomy, changes in finances and employment, changes in sexual behavior, problems reintegrating the service member into daily life, heightened conflict, and separation or divorce (*RQ1*). Whereas some individuals mentioned personal growth from increased autonomy or more fulfilling sexual intimacy, the vast majority of these comments described destructive changes to the relationship. More broadly, the list of changes identified by *RQ1* provides an initial roadmap for what people may encounter upon homecoming. As Mmari et al. (2009) noted, "Although family members may prepare themselves for the initial departure, they may be less prepared to handle the stresses that arise after the deployed [service member] returns" (p. 471). The responses to *RQ1* could help supply military couples with more realistic expectations of reunion than the idealized images that may develop during separation (e.g., Yerkes & Holloway, 1996).

Participants reported seven themes of relational uncertainty during the post-deployment transition: questions about commitment, reintegration, household stressors, personality changes, sexual behavior and infidelity, the health of the service member, and communication (*RQ2*). Notably, these content areas of relational uncertainty both converge with and diverge from those identified in other contexts. The most frequently mentioned theme – questions about commitment to the relationship – mirrors a content area prominent in both courtship (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999) and marriage (Knobloch, 2008a). Similarly, the themes of household chores, sexual intimacy, health and illness, and communication surfaced in a prior study of marriage (Knobloch, 2008a). Questions distinctive to military couples during the post-deployment transition include (a) how to reintegrate the service member into family life, (b) personality changes that may have occurred during the separation, and (c) whether partners remained faithful during deployment. These latter issues illustrate how relational uncertainty may take on nuanced shades of meaning depending on the interpersonal domain (Knobloch, 2010).

Individuals also described eight ways they encounter interference from partners (*RQ3*). The content areas involved everyday routines, household chores, control issues, feeling smothered, parenting, partner differences, social networks and social activities, and not having enough time to spend together. These findings are important for at least three reasons. First, they provide empirical evidence supporting scholarly speculation that reintegration is challenging for military couples because their previously established sequences of behavior are disrupted (e.g., Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Drummet, Coleman, & Cable, 2003). Second, they offer clues about the origins of people's strong emotional reactions to each other during the reentry phase (e.g., Bowling & Sherman, 2008). Berscheid (1983, 1991) theorized that people experience negative emotion when a partner hampers them in a quest to accomplish a goal. If so, then this study identifies

eight precursors to negative emotion during the post-deployment transition (e.g., Fehr & Harasymchuk, 2005). A related point is pragmatic: Military couples who know the kinds of interference they are likely to encounter (and instigate) upon reunion may be better equipped to mesh their daily routines, and by extension, sidestep some negative emotion.

The findings for *RQ1*, *RQ2*, and *RQ3*, viewed as a whole, underscore a conspicuous dilemma facing military personnel and at-home partners during the cycle of deployment and reentry. Namely, the very behaviors that may be functional during deployment may be dysfunctional during reintegration (e.g., Gambardella, 2008; Sahlstein et al., 2009; Vormbrock, 1993). Consider three examples. The emotional detachment that may serve a warrior and a worried partner well during deployment (e.g., Bowling & Sherman, 2008) may be an obstacle to reconnecting upon reunion (*RQ1*). Advice to keep communication exchanges constructive during deployment so troops can concentrate on performing effectively in the war zone (e.g., McNulty, 2005) may foster relational uncertainty during reintegration (*RQ2*). At-home partners who flourish during deployment by cultivating their autonomy (e.g., Gambardella, 2008) seem to have difficulty conceding that control upon reunion (*RQ3*). Although this conjecture extends beyond the scope of our study, it highlights the importance of identifying the risks versus resiliency of people's coping behaviors across the trajectory of deployment (e.g., Palmer, 2008).

RQ4 examined features of individuals, relationships, and deployments that may correspond with people's experiences during reentry. On one hand, participants' descriptions of the post-deployment transition were largely consistent across age, marital status, relationship length, military branch, and length of deployment. In contrast, other results imply that some individuals may find the post-deployment transition more challenging than others. For example, women were more likely than men to report (a) relational uncertainty about the service member's health, (b) at least one issue of interference from partners, and (c) interference via disruptions to their everyday routines. These same differences were apparent for at-home partners versus deployed partners (notably, women comprised the vast majority of our sample of at-home partners). Moreover, when service members held reserve status rather than active duty status, participants were more likely to note (a) relationship changes regarding finances and employment, heightened conflict, and separation or divorce, and (b) at least one issue of relational uncertainty. Although caution is prudent due to the exploratory nature of these analyses, the findings suggest that women, at-home partners, and reservist couples may be particularly likely to encounter turmoil upon reunion.

Other findings for *RQ4* hint at the trajectory of the post-deployment transition. Previous work implies that military couples may experience delight, relief, excitement, and harmony during the first few weeks after homecoming, but their optimism and affection may dwindle as everyday stressors begin to take a toll (Milliken, Auchterlonie, & Hoge, 2007; Wood et al., 1995). Anecdotally, several participants mentioned a honeymoon period, and their comments cohered with the quantitative results for the length of time service members had been home. When deployed partners had been home for a longer time, participants were more likely to report (a) heightened conflict as a change in their relationship, (b) at least one issue of relational uncertainty, and (c) interference due to differences between partners. Our cross-sectional research design is not equipped to

support time-ordered claims, so an agenda item for future research is to investigate how the post-deployment transition develops over time.

With respect to theory, our results suggest that the relational turbulence model may be helpful for understanding the experiences of military couples during reintegration. The model argues that transitions are marked by relationship changes, relational uncertainty, and interference from partners (Solomon & Knobloch, 2001, 2004). Service members and at-home partners reported experiencing notable changes to their relationship (*RQ1*), relational uncertainty (*RQ2*), and interference from partners (*RQ3*) during reentry. The model also proposes that times of transition can spark relationship growth or relationship decay (Solomon et al., 2010), and our data reveal that some partnerships thrived and others languished during the reunion period. Notably, however, we did not assess relational turbulence directly. A next step is to evaluate whether relational uncertainty and interference from partners predict people's constructive and destructive experiences of relational turbulence during the post-deployment transition.

A broader implication is that both deductive and inductive theorizing is required to translate the relational turbulence model into new domains. Deductive logic led us to expect that the constructs of relationship change, relational uncertainty, and interference from partners would have utility for illuminating the transition from deployment to reintegration (Solomon & Knobloch, 2004). Inductive logic was necessary to identify the themes underlying the three constructs. What kinds of relationship change do people experience? What issues of relational uncertainty are salient? What types of interference from partners occur? Although previous work hinted at the issues facing military couples during the post-deployment transition (Bowling & Sherman, 2008; Peebles-Kleiger & Kleiger, 1994), the depth and richness of people's experiences came to light via an inductive approach (e.g., Faber et al., 2008; Merolla, 2010; Sahlstein et al., 2009). Our study lays a foundation for additional work on both fronts. Not only can scholars use deductive logic to formulate hypotheses with confidence that they are not overlooking major themes of relationship change, relational uncertainty, and interference from partners, but they also can employ inductive logic to delve more deeply into any of the 25 content areas we identified.

Other directions for future research stem from limitations of this study. First and foremost, the cross-sectional data do not permit conclusions about fluctuations over time. Longitudinal research would be useful to document how the post-deployment transition progresses sequentially. Second, like the bulk of previous work on military relationships (e.g., McNulty, 2005; SteelFisher et al., 2008; Wood et al., 1995), the research design targeted individuals rather than couples. Dyadic data would be valuable for delineating interdependence between partners. Finally, the majority of military personnel in the sample were affiliated with the U.S. National Guard or the Army. Additional work is necessary to evaluate whether the findings generalize to members of the U.S. Navy, Air Force, and Marines.

Conclusion

The relational turbulence model provided a theoretical framework for examining the reentry of service members into family life. Content analytic results identified

10 changes to people's relationships (*RQ1*), seven themes of relational uncertainty (*RQ2*), and eight forms of interference from partners (*RQ3*). Women, at-home partners, and reservist couples may be particularly vulnerable to upheaval (*RQ4*). Both positively valenced and negatively valenced outcomes were apparent in the data, so a lingering question involves the parameters that govern whether relationships become more or less fulfilling across the cycle of deployment. We echo recent calls to study the factors that predict relational well-being during the post-deployment transition (e.g., APA, 2007; Palmer, 2008; Sahlstein et al., 2009). Certainly, military families deserve to be supported by research-based guidelines for best practices.

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Notes

1. Leanne K. Knobloch (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin – Madison, 2001) is an associate professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Illinois. Jennifer A. Theiss (Ph.D., University of Wisconsin – Madison, 2005) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at Rutgers University. Data collection procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Boards of the University of Illinois and Rutgers University.

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