

Research Plan: Impact of Combat on Military Families

Team Members

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Objectives

- To identify and understand the relationship dynamics that military families have within their immediate family, extended family, other military families, and those outside of the military community.
- To identify and understand the emotional journey significant others, children and parents go through when their family member (service member) is home and deployed.
- To identify and understand the motivations behind military families' commitment to serve in this capacity.
- To identify and understand the unique coping mechanisms around military experience and lifestyle.

Focus and Topics

The focus of our research is to understand the impact of having a family member in a combat zone. To do so, we will explore the topics of relationship dynamics, major concerns, motivations, struggles, communication, and transitions between stages (before, during, and after deployment).

Participants and Context

Participants

We will interview and observe the following participant types:

- Service members, with the following limiting criteria:
 - post-2001 combat experience
 - living in Austin or surrounding areas
- Close family of above service members (their significant others, children, siblings, parents, and anyone else with a relationship akin to immediate family that would be directly affected by the service member's experience in the military)
- Counselors/therapists treating service members
- Organizations dealing with service member homecomings and transitions more broadly (recruitment should focus on members of these organizations that regularly interact directly with service members)

Context

Each participant session is 60-120 minutes. Sessions should be conducted in the contexts relevant to the participant in questions. For service members and their family, their homes are the environment most closely associated with their experiences as a family. For service providers, sessions would ideally take place in the clinical setting or their office at work.

Activities and Method

In an effort to identify and understand our topics, we will use the following methods and activities.

Secondary Research

We will speak with subject matter experts to obtain the following:

- contacts to assist in recruiting interview participants
- important ways of conceptualizing the military family experience
- areas to focus on while conducting inquiries with research participants
- challenges and potential barriers in interacting with military families

We will also conduct online research, reading articles and reports on the experiences of military families with a particular focus on mental health. This will help orient us to the related vocabulary, areas of perceived importance, challenges faced by military families, and potential logistical and social barriers to interacting with them.

Contextual Inquiry

This method asks participants to show researchers how they conduct activities related to the research focus while the researchers ask probing questions about what is occurring. This provides the researchers with stronger evidence of behavior as compared to the less substantiated evidence provided by verbal self-reports gathered during an interview. Given the broad range of activities that may be relevant to this research focus, we plan to discover opportunities for observation in the course of conducting interviews. When an opportunity is identified, the interview moderator will prompt the participant to engage in the activities in question and show any related artifacts. For example, when discussing communication with an active duty service member, there may be an opportunity to see where and how this communication takes place. An appointment could even be made to observe an actual call take place.

Interview

We will conduct interviews with each participant. Interviews will be conducted by a moderator on the research team. An interview script will be created which will contain areas of inquiry that should be covered with each participant as well as specific questions that may be asked for each area. All questions should be focused on understanding how participants have been affected by having been exposed to combat or having had a close relative with such exposure. The moderator may ask probing questions not in the script to try to uncover underlying motivations, explanations, and stories

related to participant responses. As we conduct our interviews we will document the participants' behaviors and interactions with their partners and objects in the immediate environment.

Documentation

During each session, researchers will perform the following roles:

- Moderator—leads the session, asks interview questions and directs the other researchers as necessary
- Note taker—captures relevant notes and sketches on but not limited to the following examples:
 - behavioral observations, such as body language, that provide additional context to the words said during interviews
 - key quotes
 - artifacts in the environment
 - models of interactions
- Documentarian—captures audio and photos

Prior to each session, the team will discuss the unique aspects of the particular participant and context, amending the plan for gathering data as necessary.

Session Script and Activities

Walkthrough (~15 min)

A home tour is an activity that is customary in American culture when new people come to your house. We hope to put the participant at ease and build rapport with them by allowing them to show us around rather than diving straight into a line of formal questioning. The walkthrough will help us get acclimated to the family's personal identity and how it is manifested throughout the house. This will also give us a chance to acclimate the participant to our methods, including photography, in a non-threatening way, allowing us to capture more personal items and moments later in the session. We will have participants show us rooms in their home while we prompt them to talk about unique, interesting, or sentimental artifacts present in the environment. Researchers will look out for opportunities to probe for stories around the artifacts. The photographer will document the environment and artifacts, capturing the context where they are found.

Foundational Interview (~10 min)

These questions may be addressed during the initial walkthrough.

1. How long have you lived in the area?
2. How many in your family?
3. How long have you been married?
4. What are the ages of your children?
5. How long have you all been a military family?

6. Which branch is _____ in? What's his/her position? Where does that fit in that branch of the military?
7. What is your daily schedule like?

Reflection Timeline and Interview using Discussion Guide (~1 hour)

Zooming out from thinking about the daily schedule, we will take participants through a reflection timeline exercise to get an overview of the significant events around their military experience. During this exercise, we will ask them to plot any of the following types of events.

- Deployments, dates and duration
- Life events, e.g. getting married, having kids, etc.
- Significant challenges
- (At end of depth interview) Draw the emotional ups and downs across the span of the timeline

We will continue to fill in the timeline throughout the conversation, drawing pictures and adding detail to events based on the stories shared.

Discussion Guide

Each of the following topic areas should be covered during each session. The specific questions can be used to cover these areas but the moderator is free to probe as appropriate rather than following the script verbatim.

Communication

- How frequently did you communicate during deployments? Differences between deployments?
- How did you communicate? Can we see?
- What did you talk about?
- Can you think of an example where you needed to tell them something right away and couldn't or had to wait?
- Did communication relieve or create anxiety or stress?
- Were there differences in the way you communicated or what you talked about before and after deployment?
- What is your take on how the military has supported your family, especially after deployment?

Relationship Dynamics

- What are the differences between having one parent vs two parents at home?
- Have you had any especially difficult times between you two at any point as a result of the family's military involvement?
- Do you have any friends who have been divorced as a result of their military experience?
- Do you feel the your military involvement has had an effect on your relationships outside the military?
- How have your relationships changed over time with your civilian friends?

Effects on Children

- How do the kids take it when mom/dad is away?
- Any issues at school?

Motivations

- How do you think about your commitment to serve your country?
- Is your family religious?
 - What affiliation?
 - What role does your faith play in your everyday life?
- Have you had any issues with financial compensation from the military?
- Has travel been a positive or negative aspect of military service? (Could be about having to move frequently or getting to see the world.)

Handling Stress

- Coping Mechanisms
- Support networks (formal vs friends and family)

Military Services (Medical, Support, etc.)

- Did you get connected to a Readiness Support Group?
- What are your Veteran Benefits? Have you used them? (big vs small, medical care vs discounts)
- Are you signed up with the VA?
- Has your family had any need of therapy services?

Employment

- What was your experience like working while your partner was away?
- What was your experience like finding a job after leaving the military?
- Do you feel like your job is a source of purpose in your life?
- Do you feel satisfied with your current position?

Social Pressures

- What is your social network like? Is there a military aspect to it?
- Do you feel any pressure to do things or be involved in ways you would rather not?
- How do you feel that veterans are portrayed in mass media? How do you feel about that?

Key Aspects of Transitions

- Has your family dealt with post-traumatic stress?
- Has your family had to deal any emotional issues related to military involvement?
 - (Note for facilitator: related to descent-into-hell period)
- Has anyone felt differences in emotional distance from each other?
- Have you attended any particular homecoming events, retreats, etc.?
- Do you feel like the time away has affected the time you spend with your kids when you are at home?

Debrief

After each session, the team will conduct a half-hour debriefing session, capturing key quotes and observations on post-it notes and discussing any changes that should be made to subsequent research sessions.

Equipment

Equipment required for each session includes:

- audio recorders with fully charged batteries
- video and/or still camera with fully charged batteries
- laptop with full charged battery
- extra batteries and chargers
- notebook and pens
- single-color post-its

Schedule

Recruit Participants

Utilizing our personal and professional networks, we will recruit participants for **12 research sessions**. Participants may be individuals or multiple family members.

Research Sessions

Sessions will be scheduled from **November 2 to November 20**. We plan to complete approximately four sessions per week, transcribing interview audio between sessions.