

The Effects of Computer-Mediated Communication in Military Families during a Deployment

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Abstract

The rapid advancement of technology has impacted society in countless ways from transportation to the way one communicates. Computer-mediated communication (CMC), for instance, has allowed individuals to interact through electronics rather than face-to-face. Although critics may argue that it's made society more anti-social, other groups of people have greatly benefited from this invention. Military families have found CMC to be very advantageous since it allows them to keep in touch with a deployed family member daily. Skype, Facetime, email, text messaging, social media and other CMC have aided the spouse and children as it has relieved them of stress and anxiety during the long separation period. It has also made it easier to communicate with other families that are going through a similar experience and to get support from family members and friends that cannot be easily reached.

What are the Effects of Computer-Mediated Communication in Military Families during a Deployment?

The impact that computer-mediated communication has on military families depends greatly on the frequency and mode of communication. Multiple studies have been done on this topic observing how military families choose to interact with their soldier and their levels of happiness, depression, stress and other factors during the deployment. Certain forms of social media such as Facebook can negatively affect the family as images of the war can be posted which can cause the spouse and/or children to worry. Communication through video chatting, email and text messaging have positively impacted the family as they directly talk to their family member without outside distractions. Email and instant messaging could also lead to misinterpretation which adds additional stress and negative emotions to the separation period. Families who communicated with their service member once a day experienced the least distress and the most positive emotion indicating that this is the optimal frequency of communication.

Definition of Topic

In order to understand studies that investigate the topic of computer-mediated communication and its impact on military families during deployment, one must know what the question means. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) is the act of people interacting and communicating through electronics such as computers and cell phones. Examples of CMC include emails, Facetime, Skype, social media and instant messaging (Hu & Sundar, 2007). It has also been described as written communication due to the “lack of nonverbal cues and, at times, the reduced interactivity of e-mail and computer conferencing systems” (Walther, 1996, p.7). However, with the advent of face-to-face communication through computers and cell phones, the absence of social cues is becoming less of an issue.

A military family is composed of the officer or soldier and the spouse and children. These families may also have 2 soldiers with children, called a dual-military marriage, or just 1 officer with a spouse and no children. The likelihood of a service member being single, married or having children greatly depends on their age and rank. Junior enlisted members are the youngest thus they are often found to be single with no children. In contrast, senior officers and enlisted members are the most likely to have a family (Blaisure, Wadsworth, Dombro, Saathoff-Wells & Pereira, 2016). Due to the soldier's duty, he or she is subject to perform any task that the uniformed services desires them to do, regardless of how undesirable or inconvenient. This could include long periods of separation from family, difficulty of the spouse to continue to work due to constant assignments and children having to attend multiple school systems. For this reason, the military families' experiences defer greatly from civilian families (Burland & Lundquist, 2009).

Deployment is defined as a service member called to "leave the physical locale of the parent command and enter an environment for operational deployment or are stationed in a hostile territory" (Blaisure et al., 2016, p. 59). The duration of the separation depends on the branch of the military the soldier serves in. Typically, Air Force service members' deployments are 4 months, Army personnel will be deployed for 1 year and Navy and Marine Corps soldiers' average deployment lengths range from 6-7 months (Blaisure et al., 2016). The locations where they serve include military installations or bases and "rural field settings" within or outside of the United States. The soldier may also be notified about these deployments far in advance or briefly before they deploy depending on the urgency of an issue. Examples of events that required a prompt response from service members include the Ebola virus outbreak, typhoons and earthquakes within the US or outside of the country (Blaisure et al., 2016).

Background of Topic

Since 9/11/2001, conflicts between the United States, Afghanistan and Iraq have resulted in 2.5 million members of the military being deployed to these countries (Wilson & Knobloch, 2016). Millions of families were left for long periods of time during these gruesome wars with limited communication between the soldier and the family. As stated by the *Oxford Research Encyclopedias*, “Of the 2.5 million military personnel that have served in Iraq and Afghanistan, approximately 1/3 have deployed two more times” (Wilson & Knobloch, 2016, p. 3). During these wars, soldiers faced “life-threatening combat, hazardous duty and dangerous environmental conditions” (Blaisure et al., 2016, p.162). Service members also returned home with psychological problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and serious injuries potentially hindering them from returning to duty.

The children and spouse are also greatly affected by the departure of their loved ones. Approximately four million children are connected to the US military and over 1 million have experienced a deployment since 9/11 (Blaisure et al., 2016). Distress from the parent-at-home can lead to an overall stressful family environment and emotional problems for family members. Younger children may have difficulty understanding serious situations which could be detrimental to their developmental processes. Adolescents have higher cognitive ability to assess the situation and figure out how to cope with the family member’s departure, yet it could still affect the child’s sense of self (Blaisure et al., 2016). Youth have been known to have lower academic performance and externalizing behaviors during a deployment as well. Spouses may also experience marital stress during and post-deployment, particularly if their husband or wife returns home with psychological issues or physical injuries. This could lead to depression, feelings of loneliness and anxiety regarding their spouse’s state during combat. Caregivers are

also tasked with taking on the role of their deployed partner which can be extremely stressful if they are young or lack support from other family and friends (Weiss & Santoyo, 2012)

Although these deployments are very extensive and lead to multiple stressors, the advancement of technology has greatly impacted the stress and anxiety levels of the family. Previously, military families communicated through telephone calls, care packages and letters which could take up to 20 days to be received. Currently, with the advent of social networking sites, instant messaging, video chats and emails, families can communicate with their deployed family member daily (Wilson & Knobloch, 2016).

Discussion of Research

Multiple studies have recently been done assessing the effects of CMC during a deployment. They have all looked at the effects on the children or parent at-home and discussed which modes of communication may be the most beneficial during their spouse's or parent's absence. Overall, their research shows that it positively affects both the parent-at-home and children. However, drawbacks have been linked to using certain forms of communication which families should take into consideration when choosing how to keep in touch with their deployed soldier.

A study done by Houston, Pfefferbaum, Sherman, Melson and Brand (2013) investigates the frequency and quality of communication between child, spouse and deployed family member. It also analyzes behaviors, reactions and emotions of the child and caretaker before deployment, during the deployment period and post-deployment (Houston, Pfefferbaum, Sherman, Melson & Brand, 2013). Thirteen spouses and thirteen children with a parent or husband deployed to Iraq participated in this study. Spouses were between 24 and 53 years old

and were all females. Seventy-seven percent of spouses were Caucasian while the other 23% were African American or American Indian. The average age of the youth was 11 years old and 9 subjects were boys while the other 4 were girls. Interviews from both the children and caregiver asked about the frequency of communication before and during the deployment period. Researchers specifically wanted to know about emails, text messages and telephone calls sent to and received from their loved one. In terms of quality of communication, children were asked to discuss how well they communicated with both parents and siblings while spouses were asked about communication between their children and husband. Through a Behavior Assessment System for Children, emotion and behavior of the youth were analyzed by child and parent reports. Emotional reactions were also assessed by questioning participants about their emotions towards their parent or spouse pre-deployment, during deployment and post-deployment (Houston et al, 2013).

The results of the study indicate a decline of telephone communication during deployment but an increase in email frequency by both the children and caregiver. The quality of communication between youth and both parents had decreased during deployment compared to pre-deployment, however, spouses reported the worst communication with their husband was after deployment. A relationship was found between how frequently participants communicated with their deployed soldier and the quality of their conversations. Correlations were also found between family communication with deployed parent and child emotional and behavioral problems (Houston et al, 2013). Communication with their father and more feelings of loneliness and anger of the child were also related. Similarly, spouses reported being upset and stressed around children when they received frequent e-mails from their partner (Houston et al, 2013).

Researchers concluded from the results that frequent communication with their deployed family member led to better quality of communication, greater personal adjustment of children and less chances of the parent-at-home losing their temper and being upset. They also stated that more communication resulted in more emotional and behavioral problems of the child from worrying about their parent located in a harmful environment (Houston et al, 2013). Findings imply that sibling communication may reduce anger and feelings of loneliness during deployment. Discussing thoughts and emotions with other military children is also suggested by researchers. Spouses also experienced loneliness as frequency of communication with their partner increased. Due to this finding, researchers want to investigate spouses' triggers for wanting to communicate with their deployed loved one to understand how more communication led to feelings of loneliness. Further research also needs to be done on the impacts of newer forms of communication through technology, specifically text messaging and e-mail. The results indicate that these modes of communicating may have negative outcomes. The lack of emotional cues could lead to misinterpretation and result in distress and confusion of the youth and spouse (Houston et al, 2013).

In 2014, a study collected both qualitative and quantitative data and investigated the effect of increased exposure to technology during a deployment specifically in children's lives. Twenty families participated in this study with children ranging from ages 8 to 12. They lived all over the United States and were primarily Caucasian except for two families who were Asian American and Hispanic. The duration of the deployments of the service members ranged from two to twenty-four months. Researchers had multiple hypotheses including "increased internet communication with deployed parents will be associated with positive effects and attitudes in children's reaction to deployment" and "for children whose parent has returned from

deployment, a history of internet communication will be associated with an easier transition following the parents return home” (Goodney, 2014, p.36). Participants were first surveyed and interviewed discussing deployment and self-adjustment, school and technology use. Caregivers were then asked to take a deployment experience survey that asked about the child’s behavior at school, home and other extracurricular activities. Questions about the parent-at-home’s marriage and personal technology use were also on the survey (Goodney, 2014).

This study revealed that the children that communicated with their deployed parent more frequently experienced statistically significant differences with lower ambiguous symptoms of loss. In terms of qualitative data, they gathered that children showed resiliency, maturity and emotional growth during the deployment. The interviews of the parent-at-home assessing the child’s behavior showed reoccurring themes of negative emotions, personal growth and negative behaviors externally (Goodney, 2014). Quantitative data showed that different modes of communication were positively or negatively correlated with the family’s feelings of responsibility, maturity, self-esteem and more. For instance, e-mailing and letters sent through the mail negatively correlated with the child’s depression and feelings of loss indicating that the more they sent and received e-mails and physical mail, the less they felt depressed. Video chat use was negatively correlated with the child having trouble adapting to their active-duty parent fulfilling normal roles in the household after returning home. Texting was positively correlated with the child’s maturity and responsibility and Facebook use was negatively correlated with depression (Goodney, 2014).

Another study done in 2015 explored the role of online communication, specifically social networking sites, in the lives of military spouses and found qualitative data about ten spouses during a deployment. All subjects were females who had husbands that served in the

Marine Corps and were deployed between 2 weeks and 15 months. Seven of the participants were Caucasian and the other three were Hispanic with ages ranging from 24 to 34 years old. The participants were interviewed through Skype to discuss what their purpose was for using social media, how social media impacted them and what measures professionals can take to help assist the family during the deployment. All interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and themes across all ten interviews were found and analyzed (Rea, Behnke, Huff & Allen, 2015).

Researchers concluded that online communication did assist loved ones in helping to maintain a relationship with their deployed spouse. Spouses shared that social media was the only way they connected and kept communication open and strong with their active duty member (Rea et al., 2015). Online communication allowed them to send pictures of family affairs that the soldier missed and to discuss serious matters such as money, children and their feelings for one another during the deployment. Participants also suggested that social media sites such as Facebook may provide additional information about deaths of soldiers or other military spouses complaining about the deployment that would not help them cope with the stressful time. Despite this consequence, the most frequently used forms of communication were Facebook messaging and Skype. Suggestions made by the spouses were to use email instead of social media to avoid adding more stress and worry onto the family (Rea et al., 2015).

A recent study organized by Sigelman, Friedman, Rohrbeck and Sheehan (2018) examined associations between continued communication with a deployed parent and their child. It also looked for a relationship between the age and gender of the child and quality and quantity of communication. One hundred and eighty children participated in this study ranging from ages 4 to 18. Ninety percent of the subjects were Caucasian and the other ten percent were African American, Hispanic or another ethnicity. All of the deployed soldiers were primarily serving in

the Army, Air Force or Navy and had been deployed for an average of 4.3 months when this study was done. Researchers had hypothesized that there will be increased reliance on text-based modes of communication with age and a peaking of negative emotion after communicating with their parent in early adolescence. They also predicted that low caregiver stress and high marital satisfaction will indicate good child adjustment (Sigelman et al., 2018). Qualtrics surveys were emailed to the caregiver of the participants to gather information about the frequency of different forms of communication and the quality of the communication between the child and deployed parent. The parent-at-home was also asked to observe any behavior problems or abnormalities of the child and health-related quality of life (Sigelman et al., 2018).

The findings of this study suggested that good, supportive communication between child and deployed soldier will help maintain a healthy relationship between one another (Sigelman et al., 2018). They also indicated that if communication was frequent, there were higher levels of problematic behavior if the child had low levels of positive emotion after communicating with their deployed loved one. The results did not support the hypothesis that text-based modes of communication would be used more frequently with age although sending pictures and videos were not as common in older children. Calling and video chatting were the most frequent modes of communication and there was an average of 7.09 communications per week across all ages. Researchers found no correlation between gender of the participant and the frequency of communication between child and parent. However, a relationship between high marital satisfaction, low caregiver stress and low levels of problem behavior of the child was found during this study (Sigelman et al., 2018).

The legitimacy of the results is questionable as the data was given to researchers through caregivers taking the survey about the perceived emotions and behavior of the child. Future

studies should gather information about this topic directly from the children to receive more valid results. Researchers also want to do more experimental studies to control the frequency and modes of communication between subjects and their parent to truly know if good communication through technology would help the child during the separation period (Sigelman et al., 2018).

Conclusion

The studies investigating the impacts of computer-mediated communication on military families during deployment indicate multiple benefits for conversating with their deployed loved one through electronics. Frequent communication can assist in maintaining a good relationship, help with personal adjustment and lower feelings of loss and loneliness. CMC is also found to decrease feelings of depression and anxiety and overall increase positive emotion. Consequences of using certain forms of communication and how often families chose to communicate have been found as well. Misinterpretation, images of war and fallen soldiers and the content of conversation could distress the family and service member. In spite of this, choosing not to communicate with their family member was not found to benefit the family; thus, interacting and communicating through text messages, emails, social media, telephone calls and other CMC is seen as more advantageous than it is detrimental.

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