

1-1-2017

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Military Children's Difficulty with Reintegration After Deployment: A Relational Turbulence Model Perspective

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Acknowledgement: A version of the paper was presented at the 2016 meeting of the National Communication Association in Philadelphia, PA. Data collection procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of

the University of Illinois. This research was supported by a seed grant from the Family Resiliency Center at the University of Illinois. The authors are grateful to Michael Golaszewski, Yuri Kleban, Hani Kuttub, Brandi Marinko, Virginia Murray, and Lauren Whalley for their help with recruitment.

Wartime deployment and reunion have profound effects on military families. Service members must execute their mission abroad and then reintegrate back into domestic life upon their return ([Pincus, House, Christenson, & Adler, 2001](#)). Romantic partners have to parent alone during deployment and then reallocate control after homecoming ([Faber, Willerton, Clymer, MacDermid, & Weiss, 2008](#); [Lara-Cinisomo et al., 2012](#)). Military children need to adjust to new routines in the service member's absence and then adapt to changes in family life again upon reunion ([Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass, 2007](#); [Mmari, Roche, Sudhinaraset, & Blum, 2009](#)). Moreover, military couples and children must acclimate to these shifting circumstances against the backdrop of concern for each other's welfare ([Faber et al., 2008](#)).

Although research has documented the ramifications of deployment and reintegration for military couples ([Gibbs, Clinton-Sherrod, & Johnson, 2012](#); [Mansfield et al., 2010](#)) and children ([Hisle-Gorman et al., 2015](#); [Lester et al., 2010](#)), far less is known about how the relationship climate between recently reunited military parents spills over to the well-being of military children. This gap in the scholarly literature corresponds with a gap in the evidence-based guidelines available to policymakers and practitioners supporting military families during the postdeployment transition. To bridge those gaps, our study collects longitudinal data from recently reunited military couples to map the trajectory of military children's reintegration difficulty and to investigate parental relational dynamics as predictors of military children's reintegration difficulty across the first 3 months after homecoming.

The *relational turbulence model* is the theoretical framework that guides our study. Whereas the model has a track record of success illuminating the experiences of military couples during times of transition ([Knobloch & Theiss, 2011](#); [Theiss & Knobloch, 2014](#)), we break new ground by evaluating the reach of the model beyond couple outcomes to child outcomes. Our study advances theory by testing the applicability of the relational turbulence model beyond the romantic dyad, extends research by assessing the link between the well-being of military couples and the well-being of military children, and informs practice by suggesting strategies to help military families navigate the transition from deployment to reunion.

Military Children's Difficulty With Reintegration During the Postdeployment Transition

Wartime deployment can have negative repercussions for military children. For example, a meta-analysis drawing on studies of both pre-9/11 and post-9/11 deployments showed a small but consistent effect (weighted $r = .08$) on military children's maladjustment ([Card et al., 2011](#)). Preschool and elementary school military children with a deployed parent are more likely to receive medical care for mental health problems, injuries, and maltreatment upon reunion compared to military children whose parent did not deploy ([Hisle-Gorman et al., 2015](#)). Middle school and high school military youth with a currently deployed or recently returned parent report more alcohol and drug use compared to civilian children ([Acion, Ramirez, Jorge, & Arndt, 2013](#)). Moreover, longer deployments correspond with more child behavior problems ([Barker & Berry, 2009](#); [Chandra et al., 2010](#)), heightened depressive symptoms ([Lester et al., 2010](#)), and poorer academic achievement ([Engel, Gallagher, & Lyle, 2010](#)). These studies underscore the risks of deployment for military children.

Reunion after deployment can be stressful for military children as well. *Difficulty with reintegration* refers to the cognitive, emotional, behavioral, and relational challenges facing military families upon homecoming ([Chandra et al., 2011](#); [Chandra et al., 2010](#)). Military children may encounter problems getting to know the returning

parent again, be anxious about future separations, and worry about the quality of their parents' relationship ([Chandra et al., 2010](#)). They report feeling unsure about how to cope with changes to their routines, disappointed by the returning parent's exhaustion and irritability, and frustrated by a lack of appreciation for their growth during deployment ([Huebner et al., 2007](#); [Knobloch, Pusateri, Ebata, & McGlaughlin, 2014](#)). Military children also receive less effective parenting from the returning service member the longer he or she has been away ([Davis, Hanson, Zamir, Gewirtz, & DeGarmo, 2015](#)). In fact, some studies suggest that reintegration after deployment is more disruptive for military children than deployment itself ([Huebner et al., 2007](#); [Mmari et al., 2009](#)).

Trajectory of Military Children's Reintegration Difficulty

A key descriptive question concerns how military parents characterize their children's reintegration difficulty across the transition. Some theorists have depicted the reunion phase as beginning with a "honeymoon period" that gives way to the escalating stresses and strains of everyday life (e.g., [Pincus et al., 2001](#)). Without empirical observations over time, however, those claims remain speculative. Longitudinal data are essential for ascertaining when and how to offer support services to military families (e.g., [Lester & Flake, 2013](#); [Sahlstein Parcell & Maguire, 2014](#)). Consequently, we posit Research Question 1 (RQ1) to gain descriptive information about the trajectory of parental reports of military children's reintegration difficulty:

Research Question 1: What is the trajectory of parents' reports of military children's difficulty with reintegration across the first 3 months after reunion following deployment?

Parental Depressive Symptoms

Our logic about predictors of military children's reintegration difficulty begins with the overarching assumption that parental dynamics spill over to predict the welfare of children. Notably, that assumption is supported by decades of scholarship on both civilian families and military families. Research on civilian families demonstrates that children's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral well-being is negatively affected by conflict between parents ([Cummings & Davies, 2010](#); [Grych, Oxtoby, & Lynn, 2013](#)). Similarly, work on military families shows that military children fare less well during deployment and reunion when either or both parents are experiencing substantial stress ([Barker & Berry, 2009](#); [Flake, Davis, Johnson, & Middleton, 2009](#)) or mental health problems ([Lester et al., 2010](#)).

Parental *depressive symptoms*, in particular, may share a strong connection with the well-being of military children during homecoming. Recent theorizing implies that depressive symptoms may generate upheaval upon reunion because returning service members and at-home partners are hampered in their ability to rekindle bonds, manage emotions, and communicate effectively ([Knobloch & Theiss, 2011](#)). Research consistent with this logic demonstrates that the depressive symptoms of military personnel and at-home partners positively predict military children's internalizing and externalizing symptoms during reunion ([Lester et al., 2010](#)). Similarly, when at-home partners report more depressive symptoms, military children experience greater challenges upon homecoming ([Chandra et al., 2010](#)). Both theory and research suggest that any consideration of parental spillover to military children's outcomes should attend to the depressive symptoms of returning service members and at-home partners. Thus, we propose Hypothesis 1 (H1):

Hypothesis 1: The depressive symptoms reported by military parents are positively associated with their reports of their oldest child's difficulty with reintegration.

Relational Turbulence and Military Children's Difficulty With Reintegration

The relational turbulence model considers why times of transition—even ostensibly happy ones such as reunion following deployment—can be challenging. The model has shown utility for explaining interpersonal dynamics during a variety of life changes, including (a) the transition to parenthood, (b) the adjustment to a health

condition, and (c) the shift to an empty nest ([Solomon, Knobloch, Theiss, & McLaren, 2016](#)). Recent work on military families suggests the model is relevant to how military youth experience a family member's deployment ([Knobloch, Pusateri, Ebata, & McGlaughlin, 2015](#)) and how military couples navigate reunion after deployment ([Knobloch & Theiss, 2011](#); [Theiss & Knobloch, 2014](#)).

The model defines *transitions* as periods of discontinuity during relationship progression that require individuals to adapt to changing circumstances ([Solomon, Weber, & Steuber, 2010](#)). Moreover, the model identifies relational uncertainty and interference from a partner as two parameters of romantic relationships that underlie turmoil during times of transition.

Parental Relational Uncertainty

Relational uncertainty refers to the degree of confidence (or lack of confidence) people have in their perceptions of involvement in a relationship ([Knobloch & Solomon, 1999](#)). Whereas early conceptualizations of the construct focused on the questions individuals have about their partner's participation in a relationship (*partner uncertainty*), more contemporary conceptualizations also attend to the questions individuals have about their own participation in the relationship (*self uncertainty*) and the questions they have about the dyad as a whole (*relationship uncertainty*; [Knobloch & Satterlee, 2009](#)). Both theoretical reasoning and empirical results characterize self, partner, and relationship uncertainty as unique but interrelated sources of relational uncertainty ([Knobloch & Satterlee, 2009](#); [Knobloch & Solomon, 1999](#)).

According to the logic of the relational turbulence model, individuals experiencing relational uncertainty during times of transition encounter turmoil because they lack the capacity to make sense of changing circumstances ([Solomon & Theiss, 2011](#); [Solomon et al., 2010](#)). People who are unsure about the nature of their relationship have trouble producing and processing messages when communicating with their partner ([Knobloch & Satterlee, 2009](#)), leaving them vulnerable to relational turbulence ([Theiss & Knobloch, 2014](#)). Research supporting the model indicates that returning service members and at-home partners experiencing relational uncertainty are less satisfied with their relationship ([Knobloch & Theiss, 2011](#)), judge their partner to be less responsive to their needs ([Theiss & Knobloch, 2014](#)), and communicate with less openness and more aggressiveness ([Theiss & Knobloch, 2013](#)).

Homecoming after deployment is rife with relational uncertainty for military couples. Upon reunion, returning service members and at-home partners report questions about relationship commitment, reintegration issues, household stressors, personality changes, sexual behavior and infidelity, the service member's health, and communication ([Knobloch & Theiss, 2012](#)). Extending the model's logic beyond the romantic dyad to children's outcomes, as implied by substantial research showing a link between marital dynamics and child well-being in general (e.g., [Mueller, Jouriles, McDonald, & Rosenfield, 2015](#)), suggests that the relational uncertainty experienced by recently reunited fathers and mothers should correspond with military children's reintegration difficulty during the postdeployment transition. Hypothesis 2 (H2) follows:

Hypothesis 2: Relational uncertainty reported by military parents is positively associated with their reports of their oldest child's difficulty with reintegration.

Parental Interference from a Partner

Interference from a partner happens when individuals intentionally or unintentionally block each other's ability to accomplish everyday goals ([Knobloch & Solomon, 2004](#)). During periods of relationship tranquility, people tend to participate in each other's daily routines in helpful ways, but when circumstances change, interference from a partner is likely as individuals adjust their roles and routines. According to the model, interference from a partner sparks strong negative emotion in response to the goal blockage, leading to volatility and turbulence ([Solomon & Theiss, 2011](#)). Findings consistent with the model's reasoning demonstrate that interference from a

partner experienced by returning service members and at-home partners corresponds with less relationship satisfaction ([Knobloch & Theiss, 2011](#)), more appraisals of turmoil in the relationship ([Theiss & Knobloch, 2014](#)), and less open and more aggressive communication ([Theiss & Knobloch, 2013](#)) upon reunion after deployment.

The postdeployment transition yields many opportunities for recently reunited fathers and mothers to interfere with each other's everyday goals. Indeed, military couples report hindrance in executing daily routines, completing domestic tasks, distributing control, gaining autonomy, parenting, bridging differences between partners, planning social activities, and carving out quality time together during the transition from deployment to reunion ([Knobloch & Theiss, 2012](#)). At present, the relational turbulence model has not been extended beyond the romantic dyad to examine whether interference from a partner has ramifications for children's adjustment, but the possibility is reasonable given ample evidence that disharmony in marriage affects the well-being of children (e.g., [Grych et al., 2013](#)). Hypothesis 3 (H3) stems from our theorizing:

Hypothesis 3: Interference from a partner reported by military parents is positively associated with their reports of their oldest child's difficulty with reintegration.

Method

Our research design was a longitudinal study containing three waves of online survey data from U.S. service members and their romantic partners (for other results from this sample, see [Knobloch, Basinger, Wehrman, Ebata, & McGlaughlin, 2016](#); [Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Ogolsky, 2013](#); [Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Theiss, 2013](#); [Knobloch, McAninch, Abendschein, Ebata, & McGlaughlin, 2016](#)). After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, we posted information to online forums frequented by military families and by emailing announcements to military family life administrators located in all 50 states. Military couples were required to meet three eligibility criteria: (a) one or both partners had returned home from deployment within the previous 30 days, (b) partners were custodial parents of one or more children, and (c) partners had separate e-mail accounts.

[Military couples reported on the reintegration difficulty of their eldest child in light of evidence that the deployment cycle is more challenging for older children \(Barker & Berry, 2009; Chandra et al., 2010; Lipari, Winters, Matos, Smith, & Rock, 2011\)](#). Although relying on military parents to report on their children's reintegration difficulty is less desirable than collecting data from children themselves, prior work shows a reasonable correlation between parents' and children's reports of the distress children experience during reunion after deployment ([Wilson, Wilkum, Chernichky, MacDermid Wadsworth, & Broniarczyk, 2011](#)).

Procedures

We e-mailed military couples a link to the Wave 1 questionnaire plus a unique login and a unique password. Reminder e-mails were sent on the fourth day and the sixth day to individuals who had not yet completed the Wave 1 questionnaire. On the seventh day, the Wave 1 logins expired, and we eliminated 24 military couples because one or both partners did not submit their responses by the 1-week deadline. Data collection resumed for the continuing military couples beginning on the 31st day after their enrollment for Wave 2 and the 61st day after their enrollment for Wave 3. Participants received a \$15 gift card from a national retailer for each wave they completed, along with a bonus \$15 gift card if they completed all three waves.

Participants

Data came from 236 individuals ($N = 118$ heterosexual military couples) residing in 20 states. On average, participants were 33.03 years of age (range = 21 to 63 years, $SD = 6.84$ years), and their romantic relationships were 9.61 years in duration ($SD = 5.67$ years). The racial composition of the sample was 84% Caucasian, 6% Hispanic, 4% African American, 3% Native American, 2% Asian, and 1% other. Although the vast majority of military couples were married (98%), others were engaged to be married (1%) or seriously dating (1%). Most

military couples were composed of one service member and one civilian partner (86%). Within the subset of dual-career military couples (14%), one dyad was a dual-deployed military couple.

Most service members were part of the U.S. Army (57%) or the Army National Guard (21%), with smaller percentages representing the Air National Guard (13%), the Air Force (6%), and the Marines (3%). Of the deployed service members ($n = 119$), 115 were men (97%) and 4 were women (3%). Their length of deployment, on average, was 9.67 months ($SD = 3.86$ months). Most indicated that their primary mission during deployment was combat (81%); others reported peacekeeping (9%), training (4%), relief (1%), or other (5%). Approximately 68% had completed multiple deployments (two deployments = 26%, three deployments = 19%, four deployments = 8%, five or more deployments = 15%); the remaining 32% were returning home from their first tour of duty. The length of time between homecoming and study enrollment averaged 16.78 days ($SD = 8.74$ days).

Participants were custodial parents of between one and eight children ($M = 2.11$ children, $SD = 1.16$ children; $n = 65$ boys, 51 girls, 2 not reported). Parents reported on the well-being of their oldest child (range = 6 months to 20 years old; $M = 8.10$ years, $SD = 5.47$ years).

Measures

We measured demographic variables in Wave 1 and all other variables in each wave. We conducted confirmatory factor analyses (CFA) on the multiitem scales at Wave 1 with fit criteria set at $\chi^2/df < 3.00$, CFI $> .950$ (Hu & Bentler, 1999), and RMSEA $< .100$ (Browne & Cudeck, 1993). Then, we computed the measures by averaging the responses to the items identified as unidimensional. See Table 1 for the descriptive statistics for each wave.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Fathers and Mothers by Wave

Variable	Wave 1			Wave 2			Wave 3		
	<i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)	α	<i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)	α	<i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)	α
Depressive symptoms (F)	1.91	(.86)	.75	1.87	(.78)	.76	2.00	(1.00)	.83
Depressive symptoms (M)	2.12	(.99)	.86	2.09	(.95)	.86	2.12	(1.08)	.90
Self uncertainty (F)	1.45	(.78)	.93	1.61	(.80)	.90	1.68	(1.02)	.95
Self uncertainty (M)	1.54	(.90)	.92	1.69	(.95)	.91	1.70	(1.08)	.96
Partner uncertainty (F)	1.63	(.94)	.94	1.87	(1.16)	.97	1.98	(1.28)	.98
Partner uncertainty (M)	1.83	(1.09)	.93	2.00	(1.28)	.96	1.97	(1.37)	.98
Relationship uncertainty (F)	1.59	(.88)	.94	1.80	(1.06)	.94	1.83	(1.15)	.97
Relationship uncertainty (M)	1.63	(1.05)	.95	1.85	(1.11)	.92	1.81	(1.16)	.92
Interference from a partner (F)	1.60	(.73)	.88	1.79	(.74)	.86	1.75	(.79)	.92
Interference from a partner (M)	1.72	(.85)	.88	2.05	(1.13)	.93	1.99	(1.08)	.93
Children's reintegration difficulty (F)	2.43	(1.25)	.82	2.48	(1.50)	.89	2.25	(1.29)	.85
Children's reintegration difficulty (M)	2.40	(1.41)	.82	2.49	(1.48)	.85	2.45	(1.59)	.85

Note. $N = 236$ individuals for Wave 1 (118 fathers and 118 mothers), $n = 225$ individuals for Wave 2 (113 fathers and 112 mothers), and $n = 223$ individuals for Wave 3 (110 fathers and 113 mothers). F = fathers; M = mothers.

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics for Fathers and Mothers by Wave*

Variable	Wave 1			Wave 2			Wave 3		
	<i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)	α	<i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)	α	<i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)	α
Depressive symptoms (F)	1.91	(.86)	.75	1.87	(.78)	.76	2.00	(1.00)	.83
Depressive symptoms (M)	2.12	(.99)	.86	2.09	(.95)	.86	2.12	(1.08)	.90
Self uncertainty (F)	1.45	(.78)	.93	1.61	(.80)	.90	1.68	(1.02)	.95

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Partner uncertainty (F)	1.63	(.94)	.94	1.87	(1.16)	.97	1.98	(1.28)	.98
Partner uncertainty (M)	1.83	(1.09)	.93	2.00	(1.28)	.96	1.97	(1.37)	.98
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Note. $N = 236$ individuals for Wave 1 (118 fathers and 118 mothers), $n = 225$ individuals for Wave 2 (113 fathers and 112 mothers), and $n = 223$ individuals for Wave 3 (110 fathers and 113 mothers). F = fathers; M = mothers.

Depressive symptoms

We measured depressive symptoms via the 3-item Mental Health Inventory (MHI-d; [Berwick et al., 1991](#)). The MHI-d is a face valid, reliable, and precise measure that shows good sensitivity and specificity in screening for major depression and dysthymia compared to clinical diagnostic interviews ([Cuijpers, Smits, Donker, ten Have, & de Graff, 2009](#); [Yamazaki, Fukuhara, & Green, 2005](#)). The items completed the stem "How often in the past 30 days have you . . .?" (a) felt downhearted and blue, (b) been a happy person (reverse scored), and (c) felt so down in the dumps that nothing could cheer you up (1 = *none of the time*, 6 = *all of the time*; $\chi^2/df = 1.41$, CFI = .995, RMSEA = .056).

Relational uncertainty

We used short forms of [Knobloch and Solomon's \(1999\)](#) measures to assess the three sources of relational uncertainty. Individuals responded to items prefaced by the stem "How certain are you about . . ." (1 = *completely or almost completely uncertain*, 6 = *completely or almost completely certain*; all items were reverse scored). *Self uncertainty* contained four items: (a) how you feel about your relationship, (b) your view of your relationship, (c) how important your relationship is to you, and (d) your goals for the future of your relationship ($\chi^2/df = 1.31$, CFI = .997, RMSEA = .034). *Partner uncertainty* involved four parallel items: (a) how your partner feels about your relationship, (b) your partner's view of your relationship, (c) how important your relationship is to your partner, and (d) your partner's goals for the future of your relationship ($\chi^2/df = 2.73$, CFI = .962, RMSEA = .089). Similarly, *relationship uncertainty* included four items: (a) how you can or cannot behave around your partner, (b) the current status of your relationship, (c) the definition of your relationship, and (d) the future of your relationship ($\chi^2/df = 1.84$, CFI = .993, RMSEA = .061).

Despite substantial covariation among the three sources of relational uncertainty at Wave 1 (see [Table 2](#)), subsidiary CFA results indicated that they were not unidimensional when (a) the items were loaded together on a first-order factor, $\chi^2/df = 9.65$, CFI = .801, RMSEA = .196, or (b) the three scales were loaded together on a second-order factor, $\chi^2/df = 4.10$, CFI = .933, RMSEA = .117. Accordingly, we followed prior research by examining the three sources of relational uncertainty in separate analyses ([Knobloch & Knobloch-Fedders, 2010](#)).

Table 2
Wave 1 Correlations

Variable	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6
V1: Depressive symptoms	<u>.23*</u>	.20*	.25**	.26**	.21*	.31**
V2: Self uncertainty	.32***	<u>.40***</u>	.52***	.83***	.60***	.24**
V3: Partner uncertainty	.14	.67***	<u>.32***</u>	.71***	.45***	.14
V4: Relationship uncertainty	.34***	.92***	.68***	<u>.54***</u>	.50***	.25**
V5: Interference from a partner	.22*	.36***	.44***	.37***	<u>.35***</u>	.29**
V6: Children's reintegration difficulty	.36***	.19*	.18*	.27**	.36***	<u>.44***</u>

Note. $N = 118$ fathers, mothers, or couples. Wave 1 bivariate correlations for fathers appear above the diagonal, Wave 1 bivariate correlations for mothers appear below the diagonal, and Wave 1 within-couple correlations appear on the diagonal and are underlined.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 2. Wave 1 Correlations

Variable	V1	V2	V3	V4	V5	V6
V1: Depressive symptoms	<u>.23*</u>	.20*	.25**	.26**	.21*	.31**
V2: Self uncertainty	.32***	<u>.40***</u>	.52***	.83***	.60***	.24**
V3: Partner uncertainty	.14	.67***	<u>.32***</u>	.71***	.45***	.14
V4: Relationship uncertainty	.34***	.92***	.68***	<u>.54***</u>	.50***	.25**
V5: Interference from a partner	.22*	.36***	.44***	.37***	<u>.35***</u>	.29**
V6: Children's reintegration difficulty	.36***	.19*	.18*	.27**	.36***	<u>.44***</u>

Note. $N = 118$ fathers, mothers, or couples. Wave 1 bivariate correlations for fathers appear above the diagonal, Wave 1 bivariate correlations for mothers appear below the diagonal, and Wave 1 within-couple correlations appear on the diagonal and are underlined.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Interference from a partner

[Knobloch and Solomon's \(2004\)](#) 6-item scale measured *interference from a partner* coupled with a seventh item focused on parenting. Individuals responded to items introduced by the phrase "My romantic partner . . ." (a) interferes with the plans I make, (b) causes me to waste time, (c) interferes with my career goals, (d) interferes with the things I need to do each day, (e) makes it harder for me to schedule my activities, (f) interferes with whether I achieve the everyday goals I set for myself (e.g., goals for exercise, diet, entertainment), and (g) makes it harder for me to be a good parent (1 = *strongly disagree*, 6 = *strongly agree*; $\chi^2/df = 2.18$, CFI = .976, RMSEA = .071).

Military children's difficulty with reintegration

[Chandra et al.'s \(2011\)](#) 6-item scale solicited parents' reports of their oldest child's difficulty with reintegration (see also [Chandra et al., 2010](#)). The items began with the phrase "Since our family has been reunited after deployment, my oldest child has . . ." (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*). The items were (a) had difficulty getting to know the deployed person again, (b) had trouble adjusting to having the deployed person fit back into the family's routine, (c) had difficulty dealing with the deployed person's mood changes, (d) worried about future separations or deployments, (e) had trouble figuring out how to get help or assistance when he or she needs it, and (f) worried about how my partner and I are getting along ($\chi^2/df = 2.71$, CFI = .953, RMSEA = .094). Because the latter two items are not applicable to very young children, we excluded them in calculating the variable for parents reporting on children younger than 3 years of age.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

We began by investigating demographic characteristics of parents and children at Wave 1. Paired samples *t* tests indicated no differences between fathers versus mothers for any of the independent or dependent variables. Similarly, no effects were apparent for children's gender, children's age, or parents' first deployment versus multiple deployment status in independent samples *t* tests and correlational analyses conducted separately for fathers and mothers.

Next, we calculated zero-order correlations among the substantive variables at Wave 1. In general, among both fathers and mothers, results indicated positive associations among the independent variables and positive associations between the independent variables and children's difficulty with reintegration (see [Table 2](#)). We also computed zero-order correlations at Wave 1 between three time-based variables (relationship length, deployment length, and number of days since reunion) and the substantive variables. No associations were apparent for fathers. For mothers, the number of days since reunion was positively correlated with partner uncertainty, $r = .22$, $p = .020$, and interference from a partner, $r = .18$, $p = .046$.

Substantive Analyses

To examine the trajectory of military children's reintegration difficulty (RQ1), we estimated an unconditional no-predictors dyadic growth curve model using structural equation modeling. We modeled the trajectories of children's reintegration difficulty reported by fathers and mothers, and we correlated the intercepts and slopes across partners. We also correlated the residuals of the observed variables across partners at each wave (per [Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006](#)). The slope variance for mothers could not be estimated because it had a negative variance parameter, so we omitted the correlations with the slope for mothers, which resulted in appropriate parameters.

[Results from the unconditional model are reported in Table 3](#). Consistent with the descriptive statistics (see [Table 1](#)), the mean intercept values indicated that fathers and mothers reported fairly low levels of children's reintegration difficulty on average. The mean slope values revealed no systematic change across time for children's reintegration difficulty reported by fathers or mothers. However, the variance parameters showed a statistically significant amount of variation in the intercepts (i.e., average levels of children's reintegration difficulty) for both fathers and mothers at Wave 1. The variance parameters also indicated a statistically significant amount of variation in the slope of children's reintegration difficulty reported by fathers. In sum, the data for RQ1 demonstrated that (a) the growth curve initial values were heterogeneous for both fathers and mothers, (b) the trajectory of children's reintegration difficulty reported by fathers and mothers was flat across time (i.e., not different from zero), and (c) the flat trajectory was heterogeneous across time among fathers but homogeneous across time among mothers.

Table 3
Unconditional Dyadic Growth Curve Model for Military Children's Reintegration Difficulty

Parameter	Children's reintegration difficulty
Means	
Father intercept	2.45***
Mother intercept	2.42***
Father slope	-.08
Mother slope	.02
Variances	
Father intercept	1.33***
Mother intercept	1.34***
Father slope	.31**
Mother slope	.05
Correlations	
Father intercept with mother intercept	.52***
Father intercept with father slope	-.48*
Mother intercept with father slope	-.30*

Note. $N = 118$ couples. Model fit: $\chi^2 / df = 2.09$, CFI = .969, RMSEA = .096. The model omitted the correlations with the slope for mothers.
 * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Unconditional Dyadic Growth Curve Model for Military Children's Reintegration Difficulty

Parameter	Children's reintegration difficulty
Means	
Father intercept	2.45***
Mother intercept	2.42***
Father slope	-.08
Mother slope	.02
Variances	
Father intercept	1.33***
Mother intercept	1.34***
Father slope	.31**
Mother slope	.05
Correlations	
Father intercept with mother intercept	.52***
Father intercept with father slope	-.48*
Mother intercept with father slope	-.30*

Note. $N = 118$ couples. Model fit: $\chi^2 / df = 2.09$, CFI = .969, RMSEA = .096. The model omitted the correlations with the slope for mothers.
 * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Next, we added four covariates: child gender, child age, deployment length, and days since reunion at Wave 1. Similar to the unconditional model, we did not include the predictor paths and correlations with the slope for mothers. One effect emerged: Children's age was positively correlated with the intercept of children's reintegration difficulty reported by fathers ($\beta = .22$, $p = .035$). The covariate-only model explained a small amount of variance in the intercept for fathers ($R^2 = .08$), the slope for fathers ($R^2 = .05$), and the intercept for mothers ($R^2 = .07$).

A final step involved entering predictors to test hypotheses linking parental depressive symptoms (H1), relational uncertainty (H2), and interference from a partner (H3) to military children's reintegration difficulty (see Figure 1). Following previous work (Knobloch & Theiss, 2010), we examined people's Wave 1 depressive symptoms paired with one Wave 1 relationship parameter in separate models to avoid multicollinearity. We treated the independent variables as actor effects predicting people's own reports of children's reintegration difficulty. As in the prior models, we excluded the predictor paths and correlations with the slope for mothers.

The independent variables explained variance in the intercepts but not the slopes (see Table 4). Consistent with H1, the Wave 1 depressive symptoms of fathers and mothers predicted the intercepts of their reports of children's reintegration difficulty across all analyses. H2 received partial support. No association was apparent for the Wave 1 self uncertainty of mothers or the Wave 1 partner uncertainty of fathers and mothers. On the other hand, the Wave 1 self uncertainty and relationship uncertainty of fathers predicted the intercepts of their reports of children's reintegration difficulty, and a similar association for the Wave 1 relationship uncertainty of mothers approached statistical significance ($p = .068$). As anticipated by H3, the Wave 1 interference from a partner experienced by fathers and mothers predicted the intercepts of their reports of children's reintegration difficulty. R^2 for the intercepts ranged from .14 to .31.

Table 4
Standardized Coefficients of Conditional Dyadic Growth Curve Models for Military Children's Reintegration Difficulty

Model	Children's reintegration difficulty		
	Father intercept	Father slope	Mother intercept
Self uncertainty model			
Deployment length	.12	.03	.16
Days since reunion at Wave 1	.02	.03	.09
Child's sex	.08	-.19	.04
Child's age	.19*	.06	.15
Depressive symptoms at Wave 1	.22*	-.16	.36***
Self uncertainty at Wave 1	.22*	.12	.08
R^2	.18	.07	.22
Partner uncertainty model			
Deployment length	.13	.04	.16
Days since reunion at Wave 1	.04	.03	.09
Child's sex	.07	-.20	.03
Child's age	.19	.06	.14
Depressive symptoms at Wave 1	.24**	-.19	.37***
Partner uncertainty at Wave 1	.10	.20	.07
R^2	.14	.10	.22
Relationship uncertainty model			
Deployment length	.14	.03	.16
Days since reunion at Wave 1	.04	.04	.07
Child's sex	.08	-.19	.06
Child's age	.20*	.06	.16
Depressive symptoms at Wave 1	.21*	-.17	.33***
Relationship uncertainty at Wave 1	.24**	.07	.18†
R^2	.19	.07	.25
Interference from a partner model			
Deployment length	.10	.01	.13
Days since reunion at Wave 1	.02	.03	.04
Child's sex	.08	-.17	.04
Child's age	.18*	.06	.14
Depressive symptoms at Wave 1	.22**	-.15	.32***
Interference from a partner at Wave 1	.22*	.06	.31***
R^2	.18	.05	.31

Note. $N = 118$ couples. The models excluded the predictor paths and correlations with the slope for mothers.
† $p = .068$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 4. *Standardized Coefficients of Conditional Dyadic Growth Curve Models for Military Children’s Reintegration Difficulty*

Model	Children’s reintegration difficulty		
	Father intercept	Father slope	Mother intercept
Self uncertainty model			
Deployment length	.12	.03	.16
Days since reunion at Wave 1	.02	.03	.09
Child’s sex	.08	–.19	.04
Child’s age	.19	.06	.15
Depressive symptoms at Wave 1	.22	–.16	.36
Self uncertainty at Wave 1	.22	.12	.08
<i>R</i> ²	.18	.07	.22
Partner uncertainty model			
Deployment length	.13	.04	.16
Days since reunion at Wave 1	.04	.03	.09
Child’s sex	.07	–.20	.03
Child’s age	.19	.06	.14
Depressive symptoms at Wave 1	.24	–.19	.37
Partner uncertainty at Wave 1	.10	.20	.07
<i>R</i> ²	.14	.10	.22
Relationship uncertainty model			
Deployment length	.14	.03	.16
Days since reunion at Wave 1	.04	.04	.07
Child’s sex	.08	–.19	.06
Child’s age	.20	.06	.16
Depressive symptoms at Wave 1	.21	–.17	.33
Relationship uncertainty at Wave 1	.24	.07	.18
<i>R</i> ²	.19	.07	.25
Interference from a partner model			
Deployment length	.10	.01	.13
Days since reunion at Wave 1	.02	.03	.04

Child's sex	.08	-.17	.04
Child's age	.18	.06	.14
Depressive symptoms at Wave 1	.22	-.15	.32
Interference from a partner at Wave 1	.22	.06	.31
R^2	.18	.05	.31

Note. $N = 118$ couples. The models excluded the predictor paths and correlations with the slope for mothers.
 $p = .068$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Discussion

Our study utilized the logic of the relational turbulence model, coupled with research linking marital dynamics with children's outcomes, to test hypotheses about the well-being of military children during the postdeployment transition. Parents reported relatively low levels of military children's reintegration difficulty overall (RQ1), but as hypothesized, parents who experienced depressive symptoms (H1), relationship uncertainty (H2), and interference from a partner (H3) indicated that their children had more difficulty with reintegration. Parents reported that military children's reintegration difficulty was relatively stable across the first 3 months after homecoming, and none of the covariates or independent variables accounted for changes over time. We consider the ramifications of these results in the paragraphs that follow.

Implications of the Findings

Given the lack of longitudinal research examining how military children fare during the transition from deployment to reunion (e.g., [Lester & Flake, 2013](#); [Park, 2011](#)), our data have descriptive value for illuminating the trajectory of parents' reports of military children's reintegration difficulty across the first 3 months after homecoming. Both fathers and mothers reported relative stability in their oldest child's difficulty with reintegration from one month to the next (RQ1). Moreover, this relatively flat trajectory of military children's reintegration difficulty showed only modest variability among fathers and no variability among mothers across the three waves. On the other hand, our results revealed heterogeneity in the initial levels of military children's reintegration difficulty reported by both fathers and mothers.

Caution is prudent when interpreting the reports of parents, but if corroborated by data from military children themselves, our findings have two implications for clinical practice. First, with respect to the timing of intervention, clinicians should offer support services very early upon reunion because military children's reintegration difficulty appears to be quite stable and enduring across the 3 months after homecoming. Second, children's age emerged as a risk factor, with fathers reporting that older children fared worse than younger children. These covariate results complement previous work ([Barker & Berry, 2009](#); [Chandra et al., 2010](#); [Lipari et al., 2011](#)) and imply that support services should target older children for maximum effectiveness.

Although the relational turbulence model privileges relationship dynamics in theorizing about people's experience of upheaval during times of transition ([Solomon & Theiss, 2011](#)), research employing the model in the military context also has attended to depressive symptoms given the critical importance of mental health within this population (e.g., [Knobloch & Theiss, 2011](#)). Our data revealed that the depressive symptoms of both fathers and mothers predicted their reports of their children's reintegration difficulty across all models (H1). Our results for H1 cohere with work showing that the well-being of military parents is a key predictor of outcomes for military children across the deployment cycle (e.g., [Barker & Berry, 2009](#); [Flake et al., 2009](#)). They also underscore the vital need for mental health services for military families, given that both returning service members and at-home partners are vulnerable to depressive symptoms during the postdeployment transition

[\(Gorman, Blow, Ames, & Reed, 2011; Kim, Thomas, Wilk, Castro, & Hoge, 2010; Milliken, Auchterlonie, & Hoge, 2007\).](#)

The growing body of work tying the depressive symptoms of military couples to the welfare of military children (e.g., [Blow et al., 2013; Chandra et al., 2010; Lester et al., 2010](#)) may explain the sentiments expressed by military youth when interviewed about their experiences of homecoming. Military youth describe feeling pressured to get reacquainted with the returning service member ([Mmari et al., 2009](#)), confused about how to incorporate him or her back into family life ([Huebner et al., 2007](#)), disappointed that the long-awaited reunion failed to meet their expectations ([Knobloch et al., 2014](#)), and dismayed by how irritable the returning service member was upon homecoming ([Knobloch et al., 2014](#)). Our findings for H1, viewed in this light, hint that the clash between idyllic images and actual experiences may be particularly jarring for military families in which one or both parents suffer from depressive symptoms.

The relational turbulence model proposes that transitions are challenging because they raise questions about the nature of the relationship and trigger disruptions to routines ([Solomon et al., 2010](#)). Our application of the model's logic to the postdeployment transition provided modest support for relational uncertainty (H2) and full support for interference from a partner (H3) as predictors of parents' reports of military children's reintegration difficulty. Beyond the variance explained by parental depressive symptoms, higher mean levels of self uncertainty for fathers, relationship uncertainty for both fathers and mothers, and interference from a partner for both fathers and mothers predicted their reports of their children's reintegration difficulty.

On a micro level, our findings reveal that the magnitude of military parents' relationship uncertainty and interference from a partner—but not change over time—corresponds with their reports of their children's struggles acclimating to the homecoming of a service member. On a macro level, our results pave the way for conceptual and empirical advances in understanding the mechanisms by which this spillover occurs. Perhaps military youth are more susceptible to reintegration difficulty because relational uncertainty and interference from a partner generate communication problems between parents that are aired in front of the children. Both relational uncertainty and interference from a partner correspond with less open and more aggressive exchanges among military couples ([Theiss & Knobloch, 2013](#)), which could create a volatile family environment that is stressful for military children. A second possibility is that military couples are preoccupied by the upheaval sparked by relational uncertainty and interference from a partner (e.g., [Solomon et al., 2016](#)), which could constrain their ability to attend to their children's needs. Or perhaps the turmoil generated by relational uncertainty and interference from a partner diminishes the emotional availability of military parents (e.g., [Sturge-Apple, Davies, & Cummings, 2006](#)), which could prevent them from offering adequate instrumental and emotional support to their children. Our initial evidence linking the turmoil of military couples with the well-being of military children opens the door for additional theory building and testing.

More generally, our study offers pioneering evidence that the relational turbulence model is relevant to family adjustment. Whereas the model was designed to account for the upheaval that romantic couples encounter during times of transition ([Solomon et al., 2010](#)), our study hints that the turmoil experienced by romantic couples may extend beyond their own outcomes to the outcomes of their children. Perhaps relational uncertainty and interference from a partner reverberate through the romantic dyad to generate upheaval for the whole family. We see potential for the model to expand its reach by considering proximal outcomes for romantic couples alongside distal outcomes for other family members. For example, does the relational turbulence of romantic couples spill over to how grandparents welcome a child's arrival (e.g., [Dun, 2010](#)), how family members grapple with a parent's medical condition (e.g., [Lieberman & Fisher, 1999](#)), or how adult children cope with a late-life parental divorce (e.g., [Mikucki-Enyart, Wilder, & Barber, 2016](#))? If so, then the relational turbulence model may generalize beyond romantic couples to the larger family system.

Our results also suggest guidelines for clinicians working to preserve the well-being of military families during the postdeployment transition. Namely, when and to whom should support services be offered? Our findings for RQ1 imply that military family life professionals should not delay offering assistance because military children do not appear to experience the honeymoon period thought to exist for adults (e.g., [Milliken et al., 2007](#); [Pincus et al., 2001](#)), but instead may experience stable levels of reintegration difficulty. Our covariate findings hint that older children may be particularly vulnerable to reintegration difficulty, commensurate with age as a marker of risk highlighted by prior research ([Chandra et al., 2010](#); [Lipari et al., 2011](#)). Our substantive analyses demonstrate that when parents grapple with depressive symptoms (H1), relationship uncertainty (H2), and interference from a partner (H3), they report that their children adjust to reunion less effectively. Perhaps military couples who get help addressing their questions about the relationship and averting goal hindrance could draw benefits that extend beyond their romantic relationship to the well-being of their children. More longitudinal data are needed to tease apart the direction of the effect given evidence of bidirectional pathways between marital dynamics and children's maladjustment ([Cui, Donnellan, & Conger, 2007](#)), but it is plausible that the relationship between military parents could serve as a nexus for intervention efforts to bolster the welfare of military children.

Strengths, Limitations, and Directions for Future Research

The conclusions drawn from our data are contingent upon the strengths and limitations of our investigation. One strength is that our study was driven by theory. Research on how military children experience the cycle of deployment and reunion tends to be descriptive, prompting calls by [MacDermid Wadsworth \(2010\)](#) and [Park \(2011\)](#) for scholars to advance theory to explain military children's outcomes. Indeed, our findings suggest the relational turbulence model has promise for illuminating spillover from parental experiences to their reports of military children's reintegration difficulty. A second strength is that we collected data from both parents. Because most studies focus on at-home caregivers (typically mothers), the literature has less to say about the perspectives of returning service members (typically fathers; [Davis et al., 2015](#)), and still less to say about the convergence between parents' reports of military children's reintegration difficulty. Our dyadic data showed, for example, that self uncertainty predicted fathers' reports (but not mothers' reports) of military children's reintegration difficulty. A third strength is our longitudinal research design. Collecting observations once per month for 3 consecutive months permitted us to map the trajectory of parents' reports of military children's reintegration difficulty over time.

Limitations are important to consider as well. First, reporter bias in our dependent variable is a possibility because we relied on the observations of military parents to gauge their children's reintegration difficulty. Although the reports of military parents and children share moderate overlap ([Wilson et al., 2011](#)), the potential for reporter bias is a particular concern because individuals with depression are susceptible to negativity in their appraisals of interpersonal circumstances (e.g., [Gotlib & Krasnoperova, 1998](#)). Accordingly, our findings are constrained by the extent to which military children's perceptions of their own reintegration difficulty diverge from their parents' reports (e.g., [Card et al., 2011](#); [Chandra et al., 2010](#)). Second, our study began at reunion and spanned 3 months. Our inability to identify predictors of change over time may stem from the short observation period coupled with a lack of comparison data before and during deployment (e.g., [Pincus et al., 2001](#)). We encourage scholars to evaluate the veracity of our findings by soliciting responses from military children directly and by tracking military families across the full trajectory of deployment.

Other limitations involve our sample. The military couples in our study were predominately Caucasian, affiliated with the Army or the Army National Guard, and contained a male returning service member and a female civilian spouse. Additional research is necessary to examine whether our findings translate to more heterogeneous military families. Our participants also appeared to be functioning well given the low levels of upheaval they reported. Accordingly, our data do not speak to whether the relational turbulence model

accounts for the reintegration difficulty of military children within families experiencing more severe mental health and/or relationship problems. Finally, our sample included parents reporting on the reintegration difficulty of military children who ranged in age from infants to emerging adults, but the measure of children's reintegration difficulty we employed may be best suited to adolescents (e.g., [Chandra et al., 2011](#)). We look forward to additional work that attends to developmentally specific aspects of military children's reintegration difficulty.

Beyond research that addresses the limitations of our investigation, we encourage future work that advances in new directions. Evidence that the cycle of deployment and reunion has implications for military children's health ([Cederbaum et al., 2014](#); [Hisle-Gorman et al., 2015](#)) and academic progress ([Engel et al., 2010](#)) points to the need for scholars to conceptualize reintegration difficulty using more comprehensive markers. Moreover, our study highlighted features of romantic relationships as predictors of parents' reports of military children's reintegration difficulty, but other factors are likely to play a role. At the top of the list are parental posttraumatic stress and anxiety, which are prominent among military couples during the postdeployment transition ([Bonanno et al., 2012](#); [Gorman et al., 2011](#); [Kim et al., 2010](#)). The combat-related trauma experienced by the deployed parent has important implications for children's adjustment as well ([Herzog & Everson, 2007](#)). Other candidates include the quality and frequency of communication between the service member and the child during deployment ([Houston, Pfefferbaum, Sherman, Melson, & Brand, 2013](#)). Scholarship that attends to the interpersonal dynamics of military couples, alongside other relevant family and military experiences, is important for supporting the well-being of military children during the transition from deployment to reunion.

Footnotes

- [1](#) Safeguards against fraud included: (a) tracking advertising to ensure that boosts in recruitment were tied to specific outreach, (b) declining enrollment to suspicious volunteers, (c) collecting open-ended data to assess participants' familiarity with military life, (d) embedding a questionnaire completion code to verify participation, and (e) removing outliers in time spent on the questionnaires. Our close inspection of the resulting data did not reveal any problems.
- [2](#) In an unconditional single growth curve model, the slope variance for mothers was not different from zero. In the unconditional dyadic growth curve model, the negative slope variance parameter for mothers appeared to be due to sampling fluctuations because no difference emerged between a freely estimated model and a constrained model in which the slope variance for mothers was set to zero, χ^2 difference (1) = 0.19, ns (see [Chen, Bollen, Paxton, Curran, & Kirby, 2001](#)).
- [3](#) According to [Menard \(2003\)](#), variance inflation factor (VIF) values greater than 5.00 indicate multicollinearity (see also [Allison, 1999](#)). VIF values for analyses containing all of the independent variables were 5.20 for fathers and 7.38 for mothers.
- [4](#) The hypothesized findings were the same when all items were used to compute the measure of children's reintegration difficulty for parents reporting on children under the age of 3. Moreover, the hypothesized results were identical when we examined the subset of parents reporting on children of minor age (18 years old or younger; $n = 114$ military couples).
- [5](#) We also investigated the subsample of returning service members who were fathers and at-home partners who were mothers ($n = 114$ couples; excluding three couples in which the mother deployed and one couple in which both parents deployed). Findings for the hypothesized associations were identical.

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Submitted: April 5, 2016 *Revised:* December 2, 2016 *Accepted:* January 3, 2017

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Source: Journal of Family Psychology. Vol. 31. (5), Aug, 2017 pp. 542-552)

Accession Number: 2017-07135-001

Digital Object Identifier: 10.1037/fam0000299