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Meaningfulness of Service and Marital Satisfaction in Army Couples

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Abstract

The vast numbers of military service members who have been deployed since 2001 highlights the need to better understand relationships of military couples. A unique consideration in military couples is the concept of meaningfulness of service, or the value service members and their partners place on military service in spite of the sacrifices it requires. In a sample of 606 Army couples, we used path analysis to examine how male service members' and female spouses' perceived meaningfulness of service added to the prediction of marital satisfaction in both members of the couple, when accounting for service members' PTSD symptoms. Spouses' perceived meaningfulness of service was linked with higher marital satisfaction in spouses, regardless of service member's perceived meaningfulness of service. Service members' perceived meaningfulness of service was also associated with increased marital satisfaction in service members, but only when their spouses also perceived higher meaningfulness. There were no significant interactions between service members' PTSD and either partner's perceived meaningfulness. Implications for enhanced attention to spousal perceptions of meaningfulness of service are discussed.

Keywords

Marital Relationship; Military Personnel; Meaningful Work; Stress Disorders, Posttraumatic; War

Introduction

Since October 2001, approximately 2 million U.S. military personnel have deployed to military operations in Iraq and Afghanistan. These service members have experienced long deployments with relatively sustained periods of combat exposure. In many cases, this scenario is repeated multiple times. For instance, Tanielian and Jaycox (2008) found that 46.5% of military personnel reported multiple deployments, with 44.9% deployed an average length of 6 to 11 months each time, and 30.2% deployed an average length of 12 or more months each time.

Although not all studies reveal a clear impact of deployment on marital factors (e.g., Karney, Loughran, & Pollard, 2012), other studies indicate that separations due to military deployments are highly stressful for military couples (e.g. Allen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2011). This stress can lead to decreased marital satisfaction, which in turn, is linked to several negative outcomes, such as impaired day-to-day functioning and recovery from stress (e.g., Saxbe, Repetti, & Nishina, 2008), poorer physical health (e.g., Whisman & Uebelacker, 2012), and likelihood of divorce (e.g., Lavner & Bradbury, 2010). Thus, it is important to understand factors related to marital satisfaction, particularly in military couples affected by the recent era of heavy deployments. In considering potential factors that might impact such couples' overall relationship quality, a consideration of the unique demands of the military lifestyle is necessary.

Military couples engage in a continual process of balancing the demands of their family and the military (e.g., MacDermid Wadsworth & Southwell, 2011). In addition to multiple family separations due both to deployments and training requirements, military couples must manage the pervasive nature of military service, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. This culture of mission readiness, or having to be available at a moment's notice, requires repeated sacrifices of the service member and their family. Such sacrifices suggest that service members' and partners' overarching sense of the value and meaningfulness of service members' engagement in the military may play an important role in their perceptions of marital satisfaction.

Organizational psychologists have identified a similar construct known as meaningfulness of work, which refers to employees' perceptions of the importance and value of what they do in their job (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). Steger, Dik, and Duffy (2012) further clarified this value as eudaimonic (purpose-oriented) rather than hedonic (pleasure-oriented). These researchers identified three primary facets of this construct. The first facet, personal meaning in work, captures the subjective experience that what one is doing matters and is important and valuable. The second facet, meaning making through work, reflects the notion that one's work is an important source from which one derives meaning in one's life. The final facet, greater good motivations, captures the idea that one's work has a positive impact on others.

The construct of meaningfulness of work offers a strong foundation for the notion of meaningfulness of service in the military. By extension, meaningfulness of service would include a service member's personal belief that serving in the military is important and

valuable, is an important source of meaning in one's life, and contributes to a positive impact on others. Meaningfulness of service may be particularly relevant to the Iraq and Afghanistan veteran cohort of all-volunteer service members, many of whom have faced multiple deployments during the past 12 years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Moreover, as noted above, the pervasive nature of military service impacts service members' spouses and partners, who also serve the broader mission of the military by having to cope with separations and handle all household responsibilities while the service member is gone. Thus, partners' perception of the meaningfulness of service is a potentially important consideration in the overall adjustment of military couples. Viewing military service and the military's mission as particularly meaningful may help offset some of the deployment-related stress that both members of the couple experience, such as a service member's postdeployment struggles with reintegration or a spouse's hardships acting as a single parent during deployment.

Of note, the construct of meaningfulness of service differs from meaning-making in the context of suffering and traumatic events, which has been shown to be associated with improved individual adjustment to traumatic events (e.g., Park & Ai, 2006) and increased life satisfaction (e.g., Calhoun, Cann, & Tedeschi, 2010). Although they may be related, meaningfulness of service is a construct that is not directly tied to cognitions or beliefs about a traumatic experience, but rather, perceptions about the value, importance, and personal meaning of one's overall engagement in service. To our knowledge, there are no examinations of associations between this broader notion of meaningfulness of service and marital satisfaction in military couples.

This study examined perceived meaningfulness of military service as a potential protective factor against relationship distress in service members and their spouses. As a strong body of research has already linked relationship distress in military couples to symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in service members (meta-analyses by Lambert, Engh, Hasbun, & Holzer, 2012; Taft, Watkins, Stafford, Street, & Monson, 2011), we also controlled for service members' symptoms of PTSD in our analyses, to determine whether meaningfulness of service accounted for additional variance in relationship satisfaction. Our primary hypothesis was that meaningfulness of military service would be positively associated with relationship satisfaction in both military service members and their spouses when accounting for level of service members' PTSD symptoms (Hypothesis 1).

We also examined two secondary hypotheses. First, we sought to determine whether perceived meaningfulness of service could moderate the well-established link between service members' PTSD and either partner's relationship distress, with the hypothesis that the association would be attenuated when an individual reported greater perceived meaningfulness (Hypothesis 2). This hypothesis was based on the notion that negative sequelae of military service (like PTSD) might be less distressing for those who view such service as more valuable and important. Second, we evaluated whether service members' and spouses' perceptions of meaningfulness might interact in predicting marital satisfaction, to determine whether the association of meaningfulness of service with marital satisfaction is dependent on one's partner's perception of meaningfulness of service. Our hypothesis was that high meaningfulness would be more strongly associated with higher marital satisfaction

when one's partner also reported high meaningfulness, rather than when one's partner reported low meaningfulness (Hypothesis 3). This hypothesis was based on the idea that relationship satisfaction is a couple-level variable; thus, agreement of both partners about how meaningful military service is might be particularly important for the relationship as a whole.

Method

Participants

A total of 606 married couples comprised of an active duty U.S. Army husband and a non-active duty (civilian) wife completed measures relevant to the current study in 2007-2008. Sixty-two percent of service members reported a deployment during the last year, with an average duration of 11.29 months ($SD = 3.61$). Couples were married an average of 5.14 years ($SD = 4.60$). Most couples (74%) had at least one child living at home, with a mean number of 1.59 ($SD = 1.33$) children per couple living at home. Service members averaged 28.66 years of age ($SD = 5.94$), and spouses averaged 27.84 years of age ($SD = 6.17$). Service members ranged in rank, including 38% junior enlisted (E1-E4), 49% non-commissioned officers (E5-E9), and 11% commissioned officers. For service members, the majority (70%) of the sample was non-Hispanic White, with 12% Hispanic, 10% African-American, and 8% other. For spouses, the sample was 73% non-Hispanic White, 11% Hispanic, 9% African-American, and 7% other.

Procedure

Participants are a subset of a sample of 664 couples recruited for a larger study of the Prevention and Relationship Education Program (PREP), a 2-day marriage education workshop (Stanley, Allen, Markman, Rhoades, & Prentice, 2010). To enroll in the larger study, which was conducted at two separate Army installations, all couples were required to be married, have at least one active duty partner stationed at the study location, speak and read English fluently, and not have previously participated in a marriage workshop similar to the one being offered (two of the 664 couples had participated in a prior workshop and were not enrolled in the larger study, but they provided baseline data and are included in these analyses). Recruitment was conducted via posters, brochures, media stories, and referrals from military chaplains. Recruitment materials presented the study as long term research with compensation of \$50 per person per assessment for completion of multiple assessments (each approximately 1 hour in length). All couples agreed to be randomly assigned to the intervention or control condition. All procedures were approved by relevant institutional review boards. Volunteers participated outside their normal duty requirements and as such could make their own independent decisions regarding initial and continued participation in the study. The data for this study were drawn from the baseline assessments conducted in 2007 and 2008, before random assignment or the intervention. To preserve homogeneity of the sample, participants excluded from this subset were small numbers of dual military couples ($n = 38$), female service members and civilian husbands ($n = 15$), or other configurations (e.g., non-active duty service members).

Measures

Marital satisfaction—Service members and spouses each completed the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (KMS; Schumm, Paff-Bergen, Hatch, & Obiorah, 1986), a 3-item scale assessing satisfaction with the marriage, the partner as a spouse, and the relationship with the spouse. Each item response is on a scale of 1 to 7, with the total score reflecting the average of responses on the three items. The KMS demonstrates excellent internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and convergent and discriminant validity (e.g., Mitchell, Newell, & Schumm, 1983; Schumm et al., 1986). The internal consistency in our sample was excellent (Cronbach's alphas = .94 for service members and for spouses). The suggested cutoff score for satisfied marriages is a couple average of 5.67 (Crane, Middleton, & Bean, 2000). The average scores in our sample were close to the cutoff score (service member $M = 5.75$, $SD = 1.20$; spouse $M = 5.59$, $SD = 1.34$), with 38% of couples falling in the dissatisfied range (i.e., couple average score below 5.67).

PTSD Symptoms—Service members completed the PTSD Checklist – Civilian version (PCL-C; Weathers, Litz, Herman, Huska, & Keane, 1993), a 17-item, 5-point Likert scale on which respondents rank the severity of their PTSD symptoms in relation to a “stressful experience” over the past month from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). Each scale item is derived from a criterion symptom of PTSD as defined by the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders—Fourth Edition (DSM-IV; American Psychiatric Association, 1994). The scale has high internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and convergent and discriminant validity (Pratt, Brief, & Keane, 2006). The scale authors recommended a cutoff score of 50 to indicate likely presence of PTSD (Weathers et al., 1993), but more recent research in a primary care setting indicated that a cutoff score of 34 maximized sensitivity and specificity for estimating diagnosis (Bliese et al., 2008). Internal consistency was strong in our sample of service members (Cronbach's $\alpha = .94$). The mean score was 33.41 ($SD = 14.77$), with 38.7% scoring greater than or equal to 34 and 16.4% scoring greater than or equal to 50.

Meaningfulness of service—Both service members and spouses completed the Work Readiness/Effectiveness Scale (WRES; Saiz, 2003 as cited in Allen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2010), a 35-item scale that measures military family's perceptions of work-family balance and perceived readiness for deployment. A review of the items on the WRES yielded four items that appeared overtly related to meaningfulness of service, using the meaningfulness of work facets proposed by Steger et al. (2012). These items were: (1) “The Army has a great deal of personal meaning to me”; (2) “Serving in the U.S. military is important, honorable, and valuable”; (3) “My (or my spouse's) work in the U.S. Army is important and valuable”; and (4) “What the U.S. is doing in Iraq and Afghanistan is important and valuable.” Each of these items were answered on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The items were significantly intercorrelated for both service members and spouses (.33 - .66), and the internal consistency of these four items was good for both service members (Cronbach's $\alpha = .77$) and spouses (Cronbach's $\alpha = .70$). We thus averaged participants' responses to these four items for a total score, which correlated positively with WRES items reflecting reports of wanting to remain in the Army ($r = .47$ for service members; $r = .34$ for spouses) and negatively with reported desires to leave the

Army as quickly as possible ($r = -.49$ for service members; $r = -.38$ for spouses). The mean score on this variable was 5.41 ($SD = 1.31$) for service members and 5.20 ($SD = 1.21$) for spouses.

Analytic Plan

Initial bivariate analyses were performed to explore overall associations of variables of interest with each other and with demographic and background variables. Then path analysis was utilized to explore (a) the main effects of the service member's PTSD symptoms and each partner's reported meaningfulness of service on each partner's marital satisfaction, (b) whether the association of service members' PTSD symptoms with either partner's marital satisfaction was moderated by reported meaningfulness of service, and (c) whether there was an interactive effect of meaningfulness of service from each partner in predicting either partner's marital satisfaction. Consistent with recommendations of Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006), we modeled data in the path analysis at the couple level, with service member marital satisfaction and spouse marital satisfaction modeled as covarying outcomes. This approach enabled us to include PTSD symptoms (which were provided by service members only, not spouses) in our analysis. The interaction terms were created by multiplying centered versions of the variables of interest together (see Aiken & West, 1991). All relevant covariances were specified between the error terms of the predictors and outcomes. The full model is shown in Figure 1. Any significant interactions were probed by creating high and low level ($\pm 1 SD$) versions of the relevant moderating variable (see Aiken & West, 1991) and re-running the path model.

We also ran the same model controlling for the following covariates: service members' rank, service members' age, total length of relationship, number of children each couple had, and number of children currently living in the household. Each variable was controlled in the path analysis by entering it as an exogenous variable, with covariances specified between its error term and all other error terms in the model, and with structural paths specified from the covariate to both partners' satisfaction variables. In no instance was the pattern of significance of structural paths changed (analyses available from second author upon request). Thus, all results are reported without covariates.

In interpreting model fit, we examined the root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA), comparative fit index (CFI), and normed fit index (NFI). Various authors have recommended RMSEA values of .08, .06, or .05 and lower, and CFI and NFI values of .90 or .95 and higher, as indicative of good fit (e.g. Hu & Bentler, 1999; Marsh, Hau, & Wen, 2004). All path analyses were conducted in Amos 18.0.

Results

Bivariate correlations among the variables of interest are shown in Table 1. As expected, service member PTSD symptoms were significantly negatively associated with all other variables, and all other variables were significantly positively correlated with each other. Of note, the associations of service members' marital satisfaction with spouses' marital satisfaction was large, the associations of service members' meaningfulness with spouses'

meaningfulness and of service members' PTSD with service members' marital satisfaction were medium, and all other associations were small in size.

The path analysis modeling predictors to covarying outcomes of marital satisfaction provided a good fit for the data ($\chi^2[7] = 29.96, p < .001$; NFI = .94; CFI = .95; RMSEA = .07). Standardized path estimates are shown in Figure 1. Consistent with prior research, greater PTSD severity was significantly associated with decreased marital satisfaction for both the service member and the spouse. Both actor effects of meaningfulness of service (i.e., service member meaningfulness on service member marital satisfaction and spouse meaningfulness on spouse marital satisfaction) were small but significant. In contrast, the partner effects of meaningfulness of service (service member meaningfulness on spouse's marital satisfaction and spouse meaningfulness on service member's marital satisfaction) were both non-significant. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was confirmed for actor effects but not partner effects.

Hypothesis 2 (that meaningfulness of service might moderate the association of service member PTSD with each partner's marital satisfaction) was tested by the effect of the interaction of PTSD with each partner's meaningfulness of service on that partner's marital satisfaction. Both interactions were non-significant and near zero. Thus, results did not support Hypothesis 2.

Hypothesis 3 (that partners' meaningfulness of service might interact in predicting marital satisfaction) was tested by the effect of the interaction of service members' meaningfulness and spouses' meaningfulness on each partner's marital satisfaction. This effect was nonsignificant for spouses but significant for service members. The probe of this interaction revealed that, at high levels (+1 *SD*) of spouses' perceived meaningfulness of service, the service members' meaningfulness was significantly, positively associated with service members' marital satisfaction ($\beta = .17, p < .01$). In contrast, at low levels (-1 *SD*) of spouses' meaningfulness, this association was near-zero ($\beta = .01, p = .85$). Thus, Hypothesis 3 was supported for service members but not for spouses. Specifically, for service members, higher meaningfulness of service was associated with better marital satisfaction only when spouses also endorsed higher meaningfulness of military service. In contrast, spouses who endorsed higher meaningfulness of service also reported higher levels of marital satisfaction regardless of whether service members endorsed high or low levels of meaningfulness.

Discussion

The purpose of our study was to empirically investigate reported meaningfulness of service in relation to Army couples' marital satisfaction. We examined this issue in both service members and partners while also accounting for an established risk factor for marital satisfaction in this population, service members' PTSD symptoms (Lambert et al., 2012; Taft et al., 2011). As expected, service member PTSD symptom severity was associated with lower marital satisfaction for both service members and spouses. Our results, however, suggest that reported meaningfulness of service adds to our understanding of marital satisfaction, albeit in different ways for service members and spouses.

For spouses, perceived meaningfulness is linked with overall higher satisfaction, even when accounting for service members' PTSD. This association held regardless of service members' reported meaningfulness of service. This pattern suggests that, if a spouse finds broader meaning in her husband's overall military service (which may have led to any symptoms her husband might now be experiencing), that meaning may offset, to some degree, the negative impact of her husband's PTSD symptoms on her marital satisfaction. On the other hand, it also means that spouses who perceive low meaningfulness of service have lower marital satisfaction, even if her husband is experiencing little to no PTSD symptoms. At the same time, given the cross-sectional nature of our study, it is equally plausible that partners in more satisfying relationships are more likely to place higher value on their spouses' military service. Future longitudinal research is needed to address this possibility.

For service members, higher meaningfulness of service was only associated with increased marital satisfaction if their spouse also perceived higher meaningfulness. When spouses reported low levels of meaningfulness, service members' meaningfulness was unrelated to service members' marital satisfaction. Given that service members are the ones explicitly engaged in military service, the value that a service member places on his service may have little impact on his satisfaction in a relationship with a spouse who views his service and the overall military mission as not valuable. In fact, it is conceivable that a service member who perceives high value and a spouse who perceives low value could be at greatest risk, for instance, if the spouse resents his service and the consequent hardships. In our sample, we did not find evidence of such an effect, but more than 90% of the spouses in our sample had a score of at least 3.5 out of a possible 7.0 on our measure of meaningfulness, thus limiting our ability to detect effects related to extremely low levels of perceived meaningfulness of service in spouses. It is important to acknowledge that there are other possible explanations for our pattern of findings. For instance, this interaction effect may simply reflect the effect of broader discrepancies in partners' value systems. Of note, however, this pattern was detected for service members only, suggesting some specificity of the effect. Future research that addresses meaningfulness of service in the context of broader values could help address this possibility.

Overall, our results suggest that wives' estimation of the meaningfulness of their husbands' service and the overall Army mission may be an important variable to consider in Army couples. However, there are several caveats to these findings. First, as noted above, the cross-sectional nature of our findings prevents us from inferring causality from these results. It is possible that greater marital satisfaction facilitates the perception of greater meaningfulness of service. Future research that examines these constructs longitudinally can help address the directionality of these associations. Also, this finding must be considered in light of the small size of the effect. Although significant in our large sample, the effect accounted for only a minor portion of the variance in spouses' marital satisfaction. Furthermore, even though there were some minor protective effects from meaningfulness, there was no actual moderation of the association of PTSD with marital satisfaction. Thus, despite the effects noted above, there is no evidence that perceived meaningfulness of service can actually *weaken* the negative association of PTSD with marital satisfaction.

These caveats notwithstanding, the identification of variables beyond PTSD that affect military couples is important. Our findings have some potential implications. The pattern of our results suggests it is important to focus on *spouses'* perceptions of meaningfulness of service. On a program level, interventions focused on military couples and families, such as the current Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness (CSF2) program (<http://csf2.army.mil/>) or the PREP for Strong Bonds program (Stanley, Allen, Markman, Rhoades, & Prentice, 2010), might be enhanced by attending to such perceptions of meaningfulness for both members of the couple. For instance, such interventions could add modules that encourage couples to have active discussions of their perceptions of the value, importance, honor, and personal meaning stemming from military service, including whether or not their sacrifices matter. Such discussions might help couples to determine whether they hold similar perceptions and to examine the potential consequences of their similarities or differences in this regard. Couples who experience discrepant perceptions of meaningfulness could be encouraged to engage in processes similar to those used in narrative couple therapy (Freedman & Combs, 1996, 2002). In narrative couples therapy, both partners are encouraged to recognize that every relationship can be experienced and expressed through multiple perspectives (narratives), and to share their own narratives with each other, to lead to a shared understanding of their individual experiences. Even more broadly, attention to potential discrepancies in perceptions of meaningfulness could be incorporated into informal couples-based programs, such as Family Readiness Group (FRG) interactions. Further research is needed to determine whether and how such interventions and programs might be affected by including a focus on perceived meaningfulness of service.

Multiple limitations of this study should be noted in considering the findings presented. As noted, our data were cross-sectional, and although results were statistically significant, meaningfulness accounted for only a small percentage of variance in marital satisfaction. In addition, the sample was composed of only male Army service members, leaving questions about the generalizability of findings to dual military couples, female service members, and couples from other branches of service. Also, the assessment of meaningfulness of service was developed in the context of this existing dataset. Although initial analyses supported its use, the scale lacks full psychometric analysis.

Future studies should focus on how to best operationalize meaningfulness of service, as well as the mechanisms involved in perceptions of such meaningfulness in both service members and their spouses. In addition, further research is needed to understand how to assist couples in which service members perceive high meaningfulness of service but spouses do not. For this group in particular, discrepancies in perceptions of meaning may impact the relationship in a negative way. Finally, future research could clarify how or whether these findings might apply to unmarried service members. For instance, research could examine perceptions of meaning from other people that are important in the service member's lives such as children, parents, and peers.

Overall, this study illustrates the significance of moving beyond individuals, not only to couples, but also to considering broader cultural contexts. Our examination within the military culture highlights the role of a cultural value in explaining relationship quality. Future examinations of transactional processes might benefit from a similar approach.

Future studies could begin comparing our findings within the military culture with work environments that also require similar sacrifices—such as missionaries, foreign service officers, law enforcement officers, and emergency response personnel. Contextual research of this type deepens our overall understanding of individuals in their environments, rather than in isolation.

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Figure 1.

Path analysis testing all three hypotheses, with standardized path estimates shown. Dotted lines represent nonsignificant paths. Covariances not shown. * $p < .05$. *** $p < .001$. PTSD = posttraumatic stress disorder; SM = service member; IX = interaction.

Table 1
Bivariate Correlations

	1	2	3	4
1. Service Member PTSD Total	-			
2. Service Member Meaningfulness	-.20***	-		
3. Spouse Meaningfulness	-.10*	.33***	-	
4. Service Member Marital Satisfaction	-.31***	.15***	.10*	
5. Spouse Marital Satisfaction	-.24***	.09*	.17***	.54***

Note. PTSD = Posttraumatic stress disorder.

*
 $p < .05$.

**
 $p < .01$.

***
 $p < .001$.