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Military Fathers' Perspectives on Involvement

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Military fathers endure repeated separations from their children. In this qualitative study we describe military fathers' range of involvement with their children, paying special attention to the implications of deployment separation and reintegration. We discuss father involvement using three overlapping major domains of functioning: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. Additionally, we consider how types of father involvement differ vis-à-vis child age. Data were gathered via focus groups conducted with 71 fathers at 14 U.S. military installations. Descriptions of involvement were rich and varied. Involvement with children was a major concern for fathers, despite or perhaps because of the challenges of military careers. We discuss factors that help explain variations in involvement and offer insights about the conceptualization of father involvement for occupations requiring prolonged absences from home.

Keywords: military fathers, military children, father involvement, deployment, father absence

Although much has been written about the importance of father involvement for children's development and well-being (Lamb, 2010), little is known about how diverse contexts of fathering might affect involvement (Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000). Military life is one such context. Today's military comprises 1.2 million active duty men, almost 43% of whom have dependent children (Department of Defense, 2009). The military's "greedy" institutional culture requires considerable commitment, limiting fathers' participation in other roles (Segal & Segal, 2004). Active-duty personnel are on call 24/7, frequently work long and unpredictable hours, and their service imposes a distinct lifestyle on the whole family given the communal character of the organization and its emphasis on discipline and control. Prolonged separations from families limit fathers' opportunities to engage in direct interaction with their children and thus may reduce fathers' ability to positively influence their children's development (Pleck, 2010). In this qualitative study we describe military fathers' range of involvement with their children, paying special attention to periods of separation and reintegration associated with deployment.

Conceptual Framework

In their influential framework, Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, and Levine (1985) assert that father involvement encompasses three components: *engagement* (direct contact through activities such as playing and caretaking), *accessibility* (potential availability for interaction resulting from fathers' presence whether or not direct interaction is occurring), and *responsibility* (overseeing the welfare and care of the child, including organizing and arranging children's lives).

The primary focus of Lamb et al.'s typology is the engagement component; in particular, observed behaviors such as time spent in activities with the child. Palkovitz argues, however, that, father involvement is a multidimensional construct that requires a broader conceptualization to capture the meaning of various forms of involvement (Palkovitz, 1997, 2002). Palkovitz (1997) identified 15 categories of parental involvement in three major domains: *cognitive*, *affective*, and *behavioral*. A key principle is that the behavioral domain has co-occurring cognitive and affective components and that continual interactions occur among them. Palkovitz asserted that involvement can be *direct* or *indirect* and can take place *proximally* or *distally*. Moving beyond easily observed fathering behaviors, Palkovitz included fathers' thought processes and affect, contending that the psychological presence of children in their parent's mind is an important element of involvement. His

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framework acknowledged that even during separation fathers can act or think in ways that constitute involvement. "Much of [fathers'] consciousness, planning and evaluation, and assessment of daily experiences is occupied or influenced by thoughts about their children" (1997, p. 208). Likewise, many of fathers' "emotional experiences, expressions and restraints" are determined by their children's behaviors and presence or absence (1997, p. 210). Palkovitz also recognized that involvement is likely to vary across individuals, time, and contexts (e.g., work).

Although Lamb et al.'s (1985) conceptualization guided our initial thinking about father involvement in the present study, we found it limiting when applied to military fathers. Because their work takes them away for long periods of time, military fathers are constrained in their ability to be accessible and physically present for their children. Indeed, the preponderance of research on the effects of deployment on children and adolescents simply terms fathers as "absent." Hence, Palkovitz's (1997) framework may help us better understand how the military context affects men's thoughts and actions as fathers.

What Is Known About Military Fathers and Wartime Deployment

Existing literature on military fathers focuses predominantly on how fathers' absence, affects children's growth and development. Deployment represents a significant challenge to children, but in their review of the military parental absence literature (pre-Desert Storm), Jensen and Shaw (1996) documented both positive and negative effects of father absence. Studies indicate that absence effects are moderated by a variety of factors including children's characteristics (age, sex), the nature of the deployment, and the mother's coping and well-being during the separation. In recent years, deployments associated with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan significantly increased the frequency, duration, and prevalence of fathers' separation from their children. Research on the consequences of these prolonged separations indicate that children and youth may be at increased risk for adjustment problems both at home (e.g., Chartrand, Frank, White, & Shope, 2008; Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass, 2007) and at school (Chandra, Martin, Hawkins, & Richardson, 2010). Results have been inconsistent regarding the effects of child age, although variations have been observed (e.g., Lester et al., 2010).

What do we know about how military fathers negotiate fatherhood under these challenging conditions? Unfortunately, little research exists about how fathers function during deployment cycles. In particular, fathers' own perspectives are curiously absent from most studies of military families' deployment experiences (e.g., Medway, Davis, Cafferty, Chappell, & O'Hearn, 1995). Even when fathers are included (see below), the focus is mostly on the logistics of communication during separation (e.g., Rohall, Segal, & Segal, 1999) as opposed to fathers' goals for and assessments of their experiences during deployment.

MacDermid, Schwarz, Faber, Adkins, Mishkind, and Weiss (2005) examined the impact of space, time, and social context on military fathers' experiences, finding that despite physical separation from their families and limited opportunities for direct interaction, many deployed military fathers expressed a strong sense of responsibility for what was happening to their children. These fathers remained psychologically present in their children's lives and did not disengage from their parenting responsibilities during deployment. Similarly, in a study of first-time fathers deployed to combat regions during the birth of their children, Schachman (2010) found that despite their geographic separation, men attempted to fulfill their fatherhood role through online communication. These fathers reported that frequent communication not only alleviated some of their psychological distress, but also helped to restore balance to what they considered to be their primary role—that of protector and provider—and gave them a sense of "being there" and being involved. As Palkovitz (1997) maintained and these studies suggested, these fathers were involved with their children.

There are good reasons to expect fathers' involvement to vary with phases of the deployment cycle. Before deployment, families typically prepare by mobilizing and organizing their resources, while service members frequently spend long hours away from the family in training and preparation. Common challenges include sudden or uncertain departure timelines and time pressure. During deployment, service members physically separate from their families, with whom contact can vary widely depending on physical location, access to communication, time differences, and demanding work schedules (MacDermid et al., 2005). Service members struggle with being away from their families, missing important events, heightened anxiety, and concerns about security (Newby, McCarroll, Ursano, Fan, Shigemura, & Tucker-Harris, 2005). Children's responses to deployment vary according to their developmental age, but frequently include: refusing to eat (infants), crying, sleeping poorly (toddlers); regressing to earlier behaviors, being clingy, fearful (preschoolers); acting out, sleep disturbances, problems with school (school age); isolation, rebellion, loss of interest in school/peers, and substance abuse (teenagers) (Pincus, House, Christenson, & Adler, 2001). In the postdeployment phase, families may experience a renegotiation of roles as service members reintegrate into the family. This stage is often considered the most difficult for both adults and children, particularly adolescents (Chandra et al., 2010). For example, one recent study found that almost 80% of veterans from Afghanistan and Iraq reported family readjustment challenges, many reporting they felt like guests in their own homes (Sayers, Farrow, Ross, & Oslin, 2009).

In summary, this study focused on military fathers' perspectives about their involvement with their children. Four aspects of involvement were addressed. First, we gathered data about fathers' feelings and experiences in the parental role. Second, we asked about involvement that included not just observable behaviors but also cognitive and affective involvement (Palkovitz, 1997). Third, we examined how fathers' reports differed based on children's age. Finally, we

examined variations in fathers' involvement according to phases of the deployment cycle.

Method

Data were gathered during focus groups conducted at 14 U.S. military installations around the world over a 7-month period in 2005. Administrators in the Department of Defense purposely selected two CONUS and two OCONUS installations from each service branch to provide a diverse array of installations; focus groups with fathers were not conducted at two installations because of logistical difficulties. Participants were recruited through fliers, assemblies and broadcast media; focus groups were typically conducted in a meeting room on or near the installation, with only the participants and the researchers present. We chose focus group methodology because we anticipated that it would generate richer discussion among fathers than individual interviews would have permitted. In addition, it permitted us to gather information from more service members than individual interviews would have permitted, given our limited time on each installation. Eligible participants were fathers who had returned from deployment within the past 6 months; the final sample consisted of 71 volunteers. The study was approved by a university Institutional Review Board.

Participants

Participants were diverse in terms of their military and marital histories and ages of their children. On average, the fathers had been deployed multiple times including both combat and noncombat deployments ($M = 5.87$), both to Iraq ($n = 39$) and Afghanistan ($n = 23$). Seven had just completed their first deployment. Most participants were White ($n = 39$), but 13 were African American, and 10 were Hispanic. Most fathers were between 25 and 29 ($n = 20$) vs 30–34 ($n = 21$) years of age, but nine were younger than 24. Twenty were older than 34, with 10 between the ages of 40–44. Most were married for the first time ($n = 54$); 10 were remarried after divorce; and the remainder were divorced ($n = 3$), never married ($n = 2$), or legally separated ($n = 1$). On average, participants had more than one child in the household ($M = 1.86$); five participants had nonresidential children. Children ranged in age from 5 months to 28 years as follows: infants ($n = 35$), preschool children ($n = 23$), school-age children ($n = 34$), adolescents ($n = 18$), and adults (4).

Procedure

Each of the 14 focus groups included between two and 10 fathers and lasted approximately 2 hours. Open-ended questions provided participants the opportunity to express a wide variety of experiences. Participants referred to themselves using pseudonyms. Graduate staff familiar with military family research completed project training to ensure procedures were consistently followed across installations. All focus groups were audio-taped and transcribed *verbatim* for analysis.

Our protocol was designed to give fathers opportunities to describe their experiences and perceptions as fathers as fully as they wished but we also asked them to address specific issues about the implications of their military career for their involvement. The focus group protocol consisted of four sections: perceptions of the roles of a father, relationships with child(ren) before deployment, communications with child(ren) during deployment, and experiences of reunion with child(ren). We began by asking general questions allowing fathers to become comfortable with the focus group format. For example, "What do you think makes a good father? What's the toughest thing about being a dad?" Later in the interview we asked fathers more pointed questions and probes to stimulate discussion about their experiences, such as, "During deployment, were you as involved as you wanted to be with your child(ren)?" "What were the difficulties in staying involved in your children's lives?" and, "What made it easier?"

Data Analyses

Data analyses proceeded in three phases: data immersion, data display, and data coding. Transcripts from each of the 14 focus groups were separately coded by three researchers. During each phase, the team met at regular intervals to compare coding results, check for agreement, resolve discrepancies, and ensure that emerging themes accurately represented the data.

Data immersion. To become immersed in the data (Morrow, 2005), we conducted quasi-deductive coding (Patton, 2002) by reading the focus group transcript for each installation and making notes on involvement-related themes that emerged repeatedly. We used our protocol topics as a guide, but also allowed new themes to emerge. To examine differences across the deployment cycle we noted themes in each of the four sections of the protocol (roles, father involvement before, during, and after deployment). In the next step of data analyses, the themes and corresponding analyses were organized into matrices for easy review.

Data display. We used methodologies developed by Miles and Huberman (1994) to organize, reduce, and display the data for easy review and retrieval. We created a matrix in which each row corresponded to one father, and each column corresponded to themes identified during the data immersion step. The age and sex of each father's child(ren) was noted in a separate column. Within each row we inserted text from the transcript into cells below the corresponding theme. Organizing the data in this way allowed us to easily examine fathers' comments by child characteristics and by phase of the deployment cycle.

Data coding. The final phase of data analyses comprised inductive coding using Palkovitz's (1997) framework. Guided by his examples of involvement across domains, each researcher read through the focus group transcripts to classify instances of involvement. We met after reading every two transcripts to compare findings, form categories, and solidify definitions, allowing new themes to continue to

emerge during subsequent transcript readings. The coding team maintained a 95% agreement rate. In every instance that coders disagreed on classification, we discussed the example until agreement could be achieved. We organized our findings in a second matrix, similar to the one generated during the data display step, assigning each theme a column heading and each father a row. Cells were filled with quotes from the transcript noting instances of involvement. We relied on our notes from data immersion and the focus group transcripts to make sure the matrix was complete. The matrix allowed us to examine evidence for each theme of father involvement to ensure it accurately represented the data.

We arrived at 11 themes of involvement in three domains. Based on the fathers' perspectives, we constructed a description of each theme and noted how the involvement related to child age and the deployment cycle. We used the previously developed matrix to link nuances of deployment cycle and child age with each theme of involvement. Finally, we separated the themes into the cognitive (seven themes), affective (three themes), and behavioral (one theme) domains. We assigned each theme to a domain based on the principle type of involvement evident in fathers' descriptions. Themes of cognitive involvement captured fathers' thought processes about involvement and fathering, such as strategizing about ways to be involved or remain involved when absent. Affective involvement themes centered on fathers' emotional experiences, reactions, and feelings about their relationships with their children. Behavioral involvement encompassed observable engagement activities, that is, direct interactions with children both at home and away. As seen in Table 1, we took special care to ensure themes were prevalent across the deployment cycle, service branches, and child age groups.

Results

We present results according to three major domains of father involvement: cognitive, affective, and behavioral. Within each section, we also illustrate each theme with findings specific to child age and phase of the deployment cycle. Thoughts, feelings and behavior are tightly interconnected as will be evident in the following sections.

Cognitive Involvement: General Themes

Fathers' comments regarding four of the seven cognitive themes reflected their overarching views about their role that did not appear to be conditioned by location in the deployment cycle. These overarching themes were: responsibility, evaluation of parenting, psychological presence, and developmental awareness.

Responsibility. Fathers discussed responsibility in terms of their roles in the family: providing financial security and support (e.g., ensuring children are taken care of, maintaining a safe, clean environment for the family); serving as the authority figure; being a role model; providing a foundation for the child; providing unconditional love and support; being a teacher or mentor; instilling values; being a good listener and friend; and being honest and consistent.

Fathers of school-age children emphasized the importance of instilling values. The uncertainty of wartime deployment prompted some fathers to document their parenting philosophies in writing. Typical of these was Roy who stated:

> I thought maybe I'm not gonna make it outta here. So I wrote a letter home to tell their mom, 'This is how I want 'em to be raised. This is what I really want them to know. . .' Tell 'em . . . what I used to be like. Just so they don't have so many questions.

Aware of their mortality in a context of deployment separation, military fathers spent time thinking about their responsibilities, and conveying those thoughts to their children.

Evaluation of parenting. This overarching theme reflects fathers' self-examination, including reflections about the effects of military service on family life. When describing their role as parents, participants often referenced an internal working model of their own father and how they made a concerted effort to emulate or reject. Tae shared, "I didn't have a father in my life from the time I was three. So I didn't want to be the same type of [absent] father."

Table 1
Evidence of Themes Across Focus Groups

Theme	Deployment cycle	Child age group	Service branch
Responsibility: Role in family (provider, teacher, parent)	All	All	All
Evaluation of parenting: Self examination; military impact	All	All	All
Developmental awareness: Knowledge of child development	All	All	All
Psychological presence: Child presence in father cognition's	All	All	All
Planning: Strategies to maintain a connection with children	All	All	All
Monitoring/control: Maintaining knowledge, supervision	All	All	All
Reintegration challenges: Resuming parenting role	During, post	All	All
Warmth/acceptance: Responsive; praise; positive emotions	All	All	All
Anxiety and distress: Experience of negative emotions	All	All	All
Emotional withholding: The need to limit involvement	All	All	All
Observable engagement activities: Behavioral involvement	All	All	All

Note. Deployment cycle: Pre, during, post deployment; Child age groups: Infants, preschool, school age, adolescents; Service branches: Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines.

Although fathers easily articulated their strengths and weaknesses as parents, many expressed ambivalence about their role as a disciplinarian both at home and when away. Some thought they were too overbearing while others thought they were not disciplining enough because of feeling guilty about being absent. Avoiding discipline was echoed by many fathers: "even when my son did things wrong, I couldn't hardly punish him because . . . I've been gone for so long" (Jim). Fathers were divided about whether they should try to discipline from afar. As Jack said, "There's nothing you can do when you're five thousand miles away . . . but even then, you don't want your contact with them to be negative." Other fathers were realistic about the challenges of trying to discipline while away. "Being a parent when you're not there is difficult with older kids . . . you can tell them what to do . . . but if you're not there . . . they do what they will" (Carl).

Because of their frequent absences, some fathers reconciled themselves to a secondary parenting role to maintain the routine their wives had created for the household. Typical of these fathers was Charles: "My role is softened because I'm gone the majority of the time . . . I'm seeing everything happen and I'm not participating cause I don't really know where my place is." Or, as Pedro expressed: "Mom does the story, Mom does dinner, Mom says prayer, and Mom puts me in bed. When I get home, all of a sudden I feel like a stranger in the house."

The demanding work context of the military sometimes made it difficult to be a father "knowing that one day you have to walk through the door and say that 'I'm deploying.'" (Mac). "Your kids learn to count on you for absolutely nothing" (Mike M). "Yeah, you stop making promises and that doesn't make you feel very satisfied with your fatherhood" (Mr. Anderson). Despite these hardships, many fathers described the benefits they felt their children received from their military service. Mike M explained, "Yea their dad was gone, but they knew the world, they've been to different countries . . . they have a stronger feeling of family." The cost of being absent was at least partially offset by other benefits of family life in the military.

Developmental awareness. Parenting presented different challenges at different ages, and most fathers learned to recognize the hallmarks of each development stage. Infancy was difficult for some fathers who were concerned about deploying at this critical time because the child wouldn't be able to understand "why I was there and then all of sudden I wasn't" (Bob). Other fathers found infancy easy because they assumed infants had little awareness of their presence or absence and they had not developed a bond with their child "I think I left at a good time" (Joe P). Fathers of preschoolers recognized the limitations in their children's thinking: "kids react a lot differently when things happen around them because to . . . little children the world revolves around them" (Roy). Parenting teenagers was particularly challenging and fathers highlighted the importance of remaining involved during a time when their children wanted more autonomy. "They're more unapproachable, they're becoming their own person and you got to show interest in what they like to do, and kind of keep your distance" (Maurice).

Psychological presence. This general theme refers to the continual presence of the child(ren) in the father's cognitions, irrespective of proximity. In particular, fathers reported thinking about their children frequently when they were not together. Considerable cognitive energy was spent trying to assure their children that they had a psychological presence in their mind(s). As Bob said, "I don't want them to think when I'm out to sea its like 'he's doing his thing.' At least they're getting something from me so they know I'm thinking about them and I'm there, not physically, but mentally—emotionally."

Consequently, fathers were acutely aware of their physical absence. A paradox expressed by most fathers was their belief that a good father should "be there" for his children; but, being a military father often meant "not being there." Some fathers accepted this, "You can't be involved with them really at all . . . there's really nothing else you can do" (Mike) and resigned themselves to playing less central roles in everyday activities, "Basically I am just a visitor" (Dave).

Cognitive Involvement: Deployment-Cycle Themes

The three remaining themes were more specific to the deployment cycle: planning (predeployment), monitoring and control (during deployment), and reintegration (post deployment).

Planning. This theme represents the planning that fathers did to sustain and nurture their relationship *with child(ren)*; it should not be confused with parental arranging and planning things that fathers did *for child(ren)*. In the military context, planning is related to fathers strategizing to maintain a connection to their children. In most instances, this planning was done in advance of deployment and required considerable cognitive effort along with an expenditure of time and affect. For example, fathers described the need to preplan care packages and gifts to send them to their children when deployed. Effort also went into planning activities designed to establish memories that would comfort their children during deployment. As Leo described his plans before deployment, "it's always hard before leaving because you try to make up this time that you're gone . . . spending time with them and trying to do things." Fathers also employed advance planning strategies to ensure that birthdays and other important milestones were preserved, even if it meant celebrating such events 'off-clock.' Typical of these fathers was Mac: "So before I left, whether it was Thanksgiving or not, we had the turkey." Such advance planning was strong testament to the importance that fathers placed on family rituals and their desire to participate in them with their children despite their absence.

Monitoring and control. Fathers invested a substantial amount of cognitive energy into developing appropriate monitoring and control strategies aimed at maintaining knowledge and supervision of their children's daily activities—given their age and the reality of deployment separation. Concerns about behavior and discipline were most common with school-age and adolescent children.

Many fathers expressed concern about their children becoming involved in misbehavior such as shoplifting and drinking. Fathers stationed with their families overseas described the importance of keeping their adolescents "in line" for fear of being kicked off base. Other fathers, however, spoke of the protective culture of the military environment, describing policies and rules designed to shelter its citizens from negative external influences. Fathers also talked about the difficulty of guiding teenagers during deployment when a "four paragraph email's not going to suffice" (Maurice). Rich, even cited the reason for his retiring as not wanting to leave his wife with teenagers while he was deployed for 6 months. Reflections about the difficulty of monitoring from afar reflect a substantial presence in fathers' cognitions.

Reintegration challenges. Fathers described the cognitive activity associated with reintegration; the process of resuming the parenting role and "work[ing] your way back into the family" (Red). We acknowledge that some examples span all three domains; however, we primarily concern ourselves with fathers' strategies about *the process* of reintegration. Scarecrow shared his plan, "You . . . need to step back and figure out how to make it easier on them for [your] transition back into the family." While Fathers differed on how long the readjustment period lasted, most fathers eagerly described the signs that marked their transition from visitor to "primary" parent, "you know cause they'll validate you . . . 'dad you're so smart,' whereas before I didn't have a clue what I was talking about" (Charles). Mailman recalled his surprise at how difficult the process was, "I thought, it's [reunion] not that big a deal. But, you don't realize . . . how *hard* it is . . . I figured . . . a week . . . everything's back to normal. But it took a *real long time* to get back to normal . . . probably almost a year." During this period fathers talked about the need to let the child warm up, and the importance of respecting children's process of coming to them. Tee recalled, "my baby girl . . . after I got back I couldn't get rid of her . . . she was like a pocket on my pants." Fathers reported struggling with the challenges of regaining respect as a disciplinarian and reestablishing emotional and physical connections with children who were often angry and resentful about the deployment.

The age of the child(ren) when father deployed figured prominently in fathers assimilation back into the family as did the child(ren)'s previous experience with deployment. New fathers wondered how to be a father, as Alex described, "I'm standing there in formation looking down at all these families and I am thinking, you know, how am I going to be a dad?" Fathers of infants and preschoolers wondered if their children would recognize them, "Children are scared of you at first. My son sort of freaked when I came home" (Pedro). Reunion was also difficult for fathers of older children who described challenges adapting to physical and emotional changes brought about by puberty.

Affective Involvement

Fathers experienced a wide range of strong and complex emotions with their children vis-à-vis their deployment. Emotional triggers included children's behaviors, personalities, presence or absence, or was determined by specific contexts. We saw examples of positive and negative emotions as well as emotional withholding. Some fathers told us that there was no joy as great as contact with their children during deployment, as TJ described, "My daughter was my biggest pickup. She really helped me through the dark times."

Warmth and acceptance. This theme focuses on fathers' desire to know and understand their child, to develop enduring emotional connections, and to create an atmosphere of trust and acceptance with their children. When at home, fathers of infants described strategies to bond with their little ones by holding and talking to them. While most fathers chose not to communicate with their infants during deployment, some desired that emotional connection and made extra efforts to stay involved with assistance from their wives. Fathers described "just hearing her breathe would be fine for me" (Joe); hearing the child say "daddy" for the first time, and having the child "give daddy a kiss" over the phone as major milestones (John).

While at home, fathers thought about how to express their emotion and tailored their strategies to the ages of their children. Physical affection was common with preschool children. Maintaining warmth and acceptance while deployed, however, was more difficult. Fathers reported that preschoolers were too young to understand and couldn't comprehend the concept of time or distance. Jim recalled, "He'd always ask me, 'Are you coming home tonight, Daddy?' And I'd be like, 'No, Daddy's still got awhile to be here.'"

Fathers of older children chose to display affection more actively such as through playing and talking. As Hal explained, "you show affection by throwing the football, baseball, or wrestling, or going hunting, or camping rather than kisses and . . . all that kind of stuff." Some fathers described the importance of routines that they maintained such as eating lunch together. Behind all of these behaviors was the desire to be responsive and sensitive to their children's needs and to ensure warm, emotional father-child interactions. As Jack said, "I want my kids to always know I love them, even though, of course, I make mistakes and blow it sometimes, but that they do know I love them and that no matter what, that I'm always there for them."

Anxiety and distress. This theme reflects the negative emotions fathers experienced. For example, during deployment, fathers reported being sad and frustrated about being away from their children and missing them greatly. Joe lamented, "It's hard looking at pictures and little videos that last 30 seconds. It's hard being away from something you've loved for so long." Some fathers felt like a failure for missing out on their children's lives as James described, "I wasn't there to see her crawl, or hear her first words. That was tough."

This theme also reflects the fathers' need to protect their children from the worry and fear their children had about their fathers' safety during deployment. Worrying was commonly reported in all phases of deployment, although it tended to take different forms depending on the age of the

child. Before deployment, fathers with young children expressed concern that their children would not remember them after deployment or would reject them. As Roy put it:

> Months before I'm deploying I'll have butterflies in my stomach . . . this horrible, big knot. Because there goes all that time you spent with your kid. Now he's gonna forget you. I spend all this time trying to make him know who I am and whenever I come back he ain't [gonna] know . . . he ain't gonna care.

Like all fathers, military fathers reported experiencing guilt about not doing the right thing as a parent and questioned how best to manage their time. Some fathers questioned whether sacrificing family time for a military career was fair to their children. "The kids didn't ask for this. They might say they understand but emotionally they don't. They are dealing with mommy and daddy going away and there's a chance that they might not come back" (David).

Emotional withholding. A distinctive aspect of fathering in the military context is the need to withhold involvement for the fathers' emotional and physical protection. Some fathers described creating emotional distance by putting more energy into their work and less into their family to avoid dealing with the difficult feelings of separation. For example, a common theme described by many fathers was the need to detach and emotionally shut down before deployment. They explained that emotionally disconnecting was a protective response to avoid the uncomfortable and potentially overwhelming feelings associated with leaving their family for deployment. "It's a natural defense mechanism, everyone puts up a barrier" (Mike M).

Fathers' engagement with their children during deployment appeared to depend on fathers' concern for their own safety and security. If fathers were not confident they would be restored and happy from conversations back home, they were cautious about checking in and potentially having an emotionally charged conversation that might compromise their safety: "You can stay involved, but you can't lose sight of what you're doing. As much as you want to be a part of your kid's life, you can't do that if you're dead" (Mac). Fathers reported similar concerns leading up to reunion. Some fathers stated that the 2-month period before reunion was "the scariest part of deployment, because you really have to be on the ball. That's when all the accidents happen . . . no one's mind is on work . . . they're more worried about home" (Rich).

During deployment, fathers consciously limited the amount of information they shared with their children about their experiences, aware of the media's graphic portrayal of war details. Mac stated, "There's things I don't tell them . . . the body bags coming back from Iraq . . . You don't want to make them have any fear, because you never know when you're going back."

Behavioral Involvement

Fathers described many routine and creative ways of interacting with their children. Here we have highlighted some of these activities as they relate to phase of deployment and child(ren)'s age.

Observable engagement activities. This theme reflects fathers direct interactions with their children while at home *or* away. At home, engagement ranged from day-to-day interactions, such as bathing and bed-time routines, to special, fun activities such as trips to amusement parks. With the next deployment looming, time was a precious commodity. Fathers stressed the importance of spending quality time with their children regardless of any specific activity. "Just being together is probably the most important thing to her. And the activity that you do together is probably less important" (Joe). Fathers saw this as a means of "making up for lost time," whether it happened before or after a deployment. "I was so happy to be back I was trying to do whatever they wanted to do" (Tae). Fathers reported age-appropriate activities such as reading stories, going to the park, reviewing homework, getting children ready for school, attending school functions, teaching their children, playing sports and video games, and participating in their musicals and plays. Fathers especially enjoyed playing and roughhousing with their preschoolers and coaching sports with older children.

During deployment, fathers communicated with their children, offering advice, encouragement, and support. A Navy father, Charles, engaged his daughter in learning about geography and cultures by sending her information about all of his ports-of-call. Eventually, he adopted his daughter's class at school and shared his experiences with them as well. "She'll want to discuss it and we'll talk about where I've been and how was it, and the people, and I'll try to get them whatever is popular there." While stories like Charles' were not commonplace, some fathers developed very creative ways to engage with their children during deployment.

Discussion

This study examined military fathers' perspectives regarding cognitive, affective, and behavioral involvement. Our findings indicate that involvement with their child(ren) was a major concern for fathers, despite or perhaps because of the challenges of military careers. Fathers' descriptions of their involvement were rich and varied, and they appeared to be acutely aware of their child(ren)'s development, personalities, and needs.

Physical absence played a major role in fathers' cognitions. Fathers in this study were aware that current cultural expectations emphasize the importance of fathers being available for their children. Unable to "be there" for significant portions of the time, many fathers thus were uncomfortable in the family arena. As highlighted in the 'evaluation of parenting' theme, some fathers talked about the need to pull back whenever they were at home, not wanting to disrupt caretaking and household management activities. Consequently, these men seemed less invested in their parenting identity and deferred to their wives for most of the child rearing. Frequent absences, however, appeared to make some military fathers *more* aware of and attentive to

changes in their children's development and capabilities. These cognitions clearly underlay fathers' efforts to monitor, regulate, and direct their fathering. Not only were they able to articulate their children's reactions to deployment at different ages, they were quick to describe pronounced physical and emotional changes in their children upon return from deployment.

Fathers' vivid descriptions of their cognitions suggest that a key influence on behavioral involvement may be the salience of a father's parent-role identity (McBride, Brown, Bost, Shin, Vaugh, & Korth, 2005). Fathers frequently referenced their own internal working model of fatherhood and how it contributed to their thinking about the meaning of father involvement. Influenced by the fathering they experienced, this internal model governed how fathers constructed their role, viewed their main responsibilities, and evaluated their parenting. This speaks to a potential connection between father involvement and father identity that we could not fully explore here, but seems evident (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004).

Fathers also expressed complex emotions about their relationships with their children in light of the demands of their military jobs. Guilt and the desire not to alienate their children featured prominently. As illustrated in the 'evaluation of parenting' theme, fathers who did not actively discipline their children were reluctant to punish them because they had been gone for so long. Fathers also expressed ambivalence about trying to discipline from afar. This presents an opportunity for reunion programs and family clinical interventions to normalize feelings of guilt while illustrating the pitfalls associated with avoiding discipline altogether. Programs that promote authoritative rather than permissive parenting practices may help fathers understand the ramifications of their parenting behavior. For example, a robust literature (e.g., Crouter & Head, 2002) consistently shows that high levels of parental monitoring is effective in reducing many problem behaviors such as drug use, delinquency, promiscuity, and poor school achievement.

The need to maintain safety in their work also appeared to moderate fathers' emotional involvement with their children, as illustrated in our 'emotional withholding' theme. While communication during deployment could be a welcome diversion, it could also be a distraction. Many fathers talked about becoming emotionally upset after talking with their kids and not wanting to call home as frequently to avoid compromising their ability to execute their duties. This ambivalence was also found in MacDermid et al. (2005). Deployment preparation programs might do well to help fathers and children anticipate and develop skills to maintain emotional closeness even when fathers must filter their communication to maintain safety.

Fathers in this study exhibited great variability in their behavioral involvement. For some fathers, involvement with their children was rich and varied: playing, talking, reviewing homework, participating in school functions, disciplining, and monitoring. Research continues to show that such fathers are likely to develop strong father-child relationships and contribute positively to their children's development (e.g., Lamb, 2010). For other fathers, interactions with their children were largely recreational, similar to those of grandparents. Existing literature (e.g., Amato & Sobolewski, 2004) suggests that these types of father-child interactions are less likely to result in meaningful parent–child relationships.

Children's ages appeared to play a role in fathers' involvement both at home and away. This is not surprising, given that changes in children's developmental capabilities represent important triggers for transitions in fathers' roles. However, many fathers lacked knowledge about what to expect of children at different ages. Deployment programs that focus on children's development might improve fathers' understanding and communication with their children. As found in other studies (e.g., Kelley, 1994; MacDermid et al., 2005), separation appeared most disruptive for fathers of young children. Fathers with infants experienced the most difficulty. In recognition of this problem, the 2009 Defense Authorization Act was passed that provides a 10 day paternity leave for new fathers. Fathers with older children experienced less stress and adversity. While older children were better able to understand that separation did not mean abandonment, fathers reported that they were more aware of the finality of death and thus showed greater concern about fathers' safety during deployment. Fathers also expressed significant challenge in parenting adolescents, particularly during deployments.

The rhythm of deployment provided yet another lens with which to view fathers' involvement. Fathers appeared to be consumed with thoughts about their children before, during, and after deployment. They understood that maintaining involvement required constant planning, coordination, and creative thinking. *Before* leaving, fathers thought about how best to stay connected and involved when deployed. As deployment drew near, however, some fathers intentionally disengaged and withdrew to reduce feelings of loss. Consistent with findings from MacDermid et al., (2005), *during* deployment, fathers frequently struggled to answer their children's questions about war activity without compromising their own safety and security. And while fathers found it challenging to monitor and discipline their children, they varied in how they parented from a distance; some disengaging and others finding creative strategies for remaining actively involved. Mothers were especially important during this time; maternal stage setting (Zvonkovic, Solomon, Humble, & Manoogian, 2005) facilitated and maternal gatekeeping (McBride et al., 2005) regulated connections between fathers and children. One of the biggest challenges military fathers faced *after* deployment was how to reestablish a bond with their children, and how to resume an active parenting role. Similar to Sayers et al., (2009) many fathers struggled with finding their place in the family and fitting in.

Finally, fathers articulated both positives and negatives associated with their military service. Negative aspects have received the most attention: guilt about their absence, inability to control children's behavior from afar; children's rejection; the difficulty of forming strong bonds with children; being a visitor and a subordinate parent at home. However, fathers also elaborated on benefits for both them and their children: increased awareness of children's devel-

opment; the opportunity to spend quality time together; greater family cohesion and strength; the enriching environment of the military lifestyle for children's growth; and the protective environment of the military culture in lessening exposure to negative influences. Normalizing these aspects would be beneficial in deployment or other parenting programs offered by the military.

Our findings showed that many fathers worked hard to remain actively involved with their children despite military jobs that required extended absences from home. These "instrumental" fathers recognized the difference between quality and quantity time and did not equate physical presence with "good fathering" (Palkovitz, 2002). On the other hand, our findings for themes regarding evaluation of parenting, planning, and reintegration, suggested that other fathers functioned as "visitors," who tended to leave most child rearing responsibilities to their wives and when at home favored child-led activities over structure and discipline. Referring to his children who treat mom as the primary parent, one such father commented, "Yeah, we're just visiting. . . That kind of how it goes. . . We're temporary" (Rich).

The inclusion in Palkovitz's (1997) framework of cognitive and affective domains allowed us to view these visitor fathers in a more positive light than cultural norm might suggest. For example, choosing to spend time having fun can be seen as fathers' purposeful action to establish closer relationships with their children. It also could be motivated by guilt and concern about being forgotten. They were very invested in having their children *know* them, not only as a parent, but also as an individual, and took great pains to demonstrate this. A final explanation for visitor father behaviors lies with the personal dissonance between the ideal fathering self (being there) and the real self (not being there). Similar to the men in Daly's (1996) intact families and Sayers and Fox's (2004) long-haul truck driver families, this dissonance was so pronounced that some fathers chose to redefine fathering so that it was more compatible with the military lifestyle, choosing to settle into a subordinate parenting role.

Our study contains several limitations that may limit its usefulness. First, while the questions in the focus group protocol were broad and open-ended, it is possible that important topics were omitted or that not all fathers expressed their opinion. Second, as with any focus group, there is the potential for social desirability effects. Fathers who volunteered to participate may have been more committed to fathering than those who did not attend. Furthermore, these were fathers' perceptions; participants' family members may have shared different views.

Despite its limitations, this study makes several useful contributions. Data from this heterogeneous sample of fathers across four service branches around the world offer a rich perspective on fathering. The diversity of the participants in terms of military and marital history, ages of children, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status lends trustworthiness to the findings. Our use of Palkovitz's framework contributes to the development of a more nuanced understanding of military fathers and adds new insights on the power of the military context to shape men's paternal identity. In contrast to previous research that focused primarily on behavior, examining fathers' cognitions and affective experiences provides us with a fuller account of involvement.

In conclusion, this study affirms that incorporating cognitions and affect into the construct of father involvement enriches our thinking about the meaning and contexts of involvement, and of the antecedents that lead to observable behaviors. Indeed, as Snarey revealed in his seminal study of generativity, fathers' thoughts, feelings and behaviors are inextricably interwoven (Snarey, 1993). Cognitive and affective involvement appear to be particularly important in contexts where fathers must be separated from children for extended periods. Indeed, conceptualizations of paternal involvement that omit cognitive and affective components may do a disservice to the thousands of fathers whose work regularly takes them away from home. In this era of globalization, that number of fathers is growing rapidly.

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