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COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES FACED BY RETURNING VETERANS AND  
THEIR FAMILIES

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## **ABSTRACT**

This honors thesis examines the communication challenges faced by military veterans and their families upon a veteran's arrival home from deployment. These challenges, if not attended to, can continue into later stages of life. As a result of a veteran's experiences from deployment and their limited communication with both other members of the military and their families back home, returning from deployment often leads to problems readjusting back to civilian life. Through an examination of the demographics of the military, the allowable communication while abroad, and the developed communication problems between veterans and their loved ones, this honors thesis incorporates communication theory to explain relationships challenged by communication barriers.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Leaving Home**

#### **Introduction**

The Global War on Terror has led millions of American soldiers to fight in the Middle East to eliminate Al-Qaeda and other militant organizations. While these men and women are overseas, a particular style of communication is used among soldiers to allow the military to run efficiently and effectively. Although improvements in technology have allowed for increased communication between soldiers and their families, communication and affection are still limited, and can lead to difficulties in relationships. The purpose of this thesis is to examine the difficulties in communication among veterans and their families upon a veteran's arrival home from deployment. Without help, these problems continue on into later stages of life and make simple tasks a struggle. A veteran may experience traumatic events during deployment which lead to problems readjusting back to civilian life. Controlled communication, both throughout the military and with their families back home can develop into learned patterns of communication behavior that limit veterans from easily transitioning back to appropriate communication in their civilian lives. Through communication theory, an analysis of how traumatic experiences depreciate a veteran's ability to communicate can serve as motivation to emphasize the need for society to better integrate the heroes returning from war.

## **Demographics**

Recognizing *who* is being sent overseas with the United States military is crucial to better understanding the communicative challenges faced by returning veterans and their families. Soldiers today differ greatly from those of the past. As the political circumstances have changed over the past century, the demographic arrangement of those serving in America's military has shifted so that the average age of soldiers today is higher than it has been during any other period of major conflict in the past one hundred years.

In both World War II and the Vietnam War, the constitutional use of conscription allowed the government to draft men between the ages of 18 and 35 to fight in the military. Since Vietnam, no draft has been used, and the force of the military has depended completely on voluntary enlistment and officer training. As a result of the draft and the high need for employment, especially after the Great Depression in WWII, military personnel during WWII and the Vietnam War were younger than they are today. While the average age of soldiers in WWII and Vietnam were 26 and 19 respectively, the average age of the United States soldier today is 28 years old ("Statistical information about," 2008). While two thirds of American soldiers who fought in WWII and one fourth of the American soldiers who fought in the Vietnam War were drafted by the United States government, many of the soldiers being sent to Iraq and Afghanistan today have volunteered as a career choice, and intend to stay active in the military until a later age.

Many soldiers today have spouses and children. As a result of the overall "older" military, soldiers are at later stages in their lives and having a family and serving on

deployment is common. Families are often placed into challenging situations as a result of the commitments of the soldier, and are forced to move residencies on average three times more often than families not involved in the military. In 2005, 54.6% of active duty soldiers reported being married. Of those who deployed while married, 51% of deployments were for a period of twelve months or more (Orthner 2005). During this time, communication with one's spouse may be problematic.

Those leaving for deployment leave not only their spouses, but also their children, forcing the children to live with only one parent for an extended period of time. Over 43% of active duty soldiers have one or more children. Deployment of a parent often takes a toll on a child's anxiety levels. Since 2001, more than two million children have experienced parental deployment. Because these children are away from a parent for such periods of time, many children feel as though they lack the "normal" parental experience, and negative emotional consequences can result. However, according to the US Census, military wives are less likely to be employed than civilian wives, allowing for more time to be spent with the children, yet bringing in less income for the family. The wives who are employed, however, earn on average less than civilian wives. These factors can all play a role in marital and family communication which in turn may significantly affect marital satisfaction and satisfaction with life in general.

A majority of the soldiers serving in the United States military are men, but of the different branches of the military, anywhere from 5.8% (Marines) to 18.3% (Air Force) are women. This also varies drastically from previous conflicts in American military history. More women are serving than have in the past, and therefore the typical

“military family” is no longer referred to as a family in which the husband serves in the military. Today, 10% of military spouses serve in the armed forces.

Education level of soldiers varies depending on whether the soldiers are enlisted or officers. 93% of the enlisted soldiers in the military have a high school diploma or some equivalency of it. 90% of the officers in the military have a college degree ("Military personnel," 2012). However, despite veterans having higher education levels than they have been in the past, finding jobs upon a veteran's return is a difficult task.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Experiences Abroad**

#### **Classical Management and Soldier Identity**

In most organizations today, management has adopted new managerial styles that represent the changing dynamics of organizational structures. Now, in many circumstances, employees are given more information and a greater ability to communicate their ideas which can result in more power. This power shapes the identity of the worker because it allows them to position themselves at a level in the organization which expresses both their worth and the worth of their ideas. The shifting power has blurred the division of labor between management and employees because employees have a higher say in the inner working of the organization.

However, while other organizations have adapted to new management styles as a result of the rise of globalization and the emphasis on employee/manager communication, the military continues to operate under a classical management approach. With a top down communication structure, the military is represented by a clear division of labor and an evident arrangement of power and authority.

This military has maintained its hierarchical structure over time for one reason: it works. Although some organizations have adapted to the modern employee-centered management style, the military utilizes classical management because of its efficiency. The emphasis on the downward transmission of information maintains a power structure that is based off of the availability of information. The top-down communication scheme

explains who has access to certain information and who, therefore, is the one giving orders. Essentially, more information results in more power and authority.

As a result of classical management style of the military, the identities of soldiers are clearly defined by their positions within the military. The rank and specified job of a soldier plays a crucial role in the allowable communication of the soldier. A soldier's identity is an indication of how he/she positions himself/herself in the organization and can be determined by both language and actions. Critical theorists argue that the more power an individual has, the more control the individual has over his/her own identity (Carr, 2000). These theorists would argue that because of the hierarchical structure of the military, the identity of the members of the military is shaped and controlled almost exclusively by the organization itself. With the use of job titles and ranks, soldiers are placed into clearly labeled positions which directly indicate what a soldier may or may not do, and what a soldier may or may not say.

In addition to ranks and job titles, identity is formed by the language used in the military. Those with power control the language and vocabulary used throughout the military, and such choices can have a weighty impact on the meaning of the language itself. For example, the "Peacekeeper Missile," which was first completed in 1986, has a specific name given to it by the higher-ups in the military. The vocabulary choice creates its own meaning which is used throughout the rest of the military. Those in charge of creating the language are given control over identity, and those using it therefore accept some level of identity from the language which defines them.

Access to knowledge plays a large role in shaping identity. Because of the top down structure of the military, access to knowledge is limited by rank, and open

communication throughout the entire organization is non-existent. The ones who control the access to knowledge have the largest influence on the identities of those all those lower in the hierarchical system.

A final aspect of the military that plays a key role in the shaping of a soldier's identity is the structural system put out by the powerful people. With promotions and organizational charts left at the hands of the powerful members of an organization, the lower ranked soldiers have less say in their own identity.

Although theorists criticize the classical management approach to organizations and claim that task specialization and hierarchy are not good for humans, such a system, based on hierarchical top-down communication, seems to be best suited for the military, as proven by years of use and efficiency (Carr, 2000). With such a large organization, made up of nearly 1.5 million people, no other management style could result in such effectiveness and efficiency.

However, because soldiers have limited abilities to communicate and shape their own identities, a concern arises as to whether being subjected to such circumstances for long periods of time while deployed affects the identity, confidence, and communication abilities when arriving home from deployment.

### **Soldier to Soldier Communication**

As previously discussed, because of the sheer size of the United States military, a certain hierarchical order is necessary to achieve tasks effectively and efficiently.

Therefore, the line of communication throughout the military is strict and follows particular guidelines. These guidelines are different from most aspects of communication

among civilians. As a result, soldiers returning from deployment often need time to return to “civilian communication.” Because deployed soldiers are limited in terms of what they can say to whom, some soldiers return from overseas and deal with culture shock that derives simply from being away from military culture.

The most essential aspect of the military is its soldiers. With nearly one and a half million Americans serving in the Armed Forces, communication is essential. From squadrons comprised of between four and ten soldiers all the way up to the President of the United States, a particular chain of communication is needed to allow the military to run successfully. An organizational structure which defines a soldier’s responsibilities is expressed through the ranks given to soldiers. These ranks indicate the chain of command, and therefore, the chain of communication, in which, up until the President, each person is accountable to a superior. General Bruce C. Clarke states, “Rank is only given to you in the Army to enable you to better serve those below you and those above you. Rank is not given for you to exercise your idiosyncrasies.” Leadership, guidance and orders are given by in a top down system in the chain of command.

The military also has a series of customs and traditions which are carried out as a sign of respect and as a way of bonding together military professionals. These customs include things like saluting higher ranked officers, as they are due honor and recognition. Their rank distinguishes their leadership, their experience, and their responsibility, and as a courtesy, it is important for soldiers to know the appropriateness of saluting and the meaning behind it (Department of the Army, 2004).

Among soldiers, different styles of communication depend on rank, situation, and appropriateness. While members of the same squadron may vary in rank, if the situation

permits, joking and teasing are normal, yet during combat or in any other serious situation, rank distinguishes those who give orders from those who take them.

The formalities of the military vary significantly from most situations experienced by veterans returning home. However, since such formalities were engrained into the soldier's minds for months of deployment, some soldiers are shocked upon arrival home by the inability to give orders or by the lack of orders being given to them. Each soldier responds differently to the "change back." While some soldiers are used to the change from years of service, others struggle with the transition. This struggle, unrecognized by the public and combined with other hidden issues developed over deployment, can lead to serious family and personal problems in a soldier's life.

### **Communicating with Loved Ones While Abroad**

As technology rapidly advances, soldiers on deployment are able to stay connected with loved ones more readily than ever before. With cellular, computer, and video technology, communication has come as close as face-to-face communication as possible without a soldier being physically near the person to whom he/she is speaking. While in years past, letters were the main means of communication between soldiers and loved ones at home, email, Skype, instant messaging, and phone calls now allow communication across the globe in the blink of an eye.

Mail call is still an exciting time for troops overseas, and care packages are appreciated by soldiers serving in the military, but the immediacy of messages using the internet allows soldiers to reach out to their friends and relatives directly. Hearing a loved one's voice or seeing a friend's face can make all the difference in a soldier's attitude.

Likewise, seeing a deployed parent's face and knowing he or she is ok can mean the world to a military child. According to Army Major Juanita Chang, the director of the Online and Social Media Division at the Pentagon, some soldiers were able to "watch their children being born over Skype." Others were able to avert family crises and save marriages through different forms of social media ("Ways to communicate," 2013).

However, while such tools are useful in maintaining relationships with loved ones overseas, in many cases, affectionate exchange is needed to fully maintain relationships. According to the Affectionate Exchange Theory, the health of a relationship relies on the exchange of affection, whether verbally, physically, or indirectly (Floyd, 2001). However, while verbal affection is possible through communication technology, a lack of physical affection can limit the strength of a relationship and cause problems among relational members.

Although new technology and social media make communicating across the globe easier, they also bring about legitimate new security threats. In years past, mail has been screened for security reasons, and the military was able to censor certain messages from being transmitted. Now, responsibility lies with the soldiers to maintain the secrecy of any information that, if discovered by the enemy, could potentially bring harm. In order to prevent accidental leaks in information, soldiers are trained to leave out specifics and to be mindful of operational security at any point in time. This level of responsibility on the soldiers greatly differs from the responsibility of keeping information hidden in the past. While every letter or piece of mail needed to be screened before, the possibilities for communication today are exponentially greater with access to the internet and social media.

By altering an old WWII poster, the Defense Department has tried to emphasize the effects of disclosure using the internet. The original poster displays a sailor angrily pointing from in the water, saying “SOMEONE TALKED!” The poster has now been updated to say “SOMEONE BLOGGED!” (Toole, 2011).

## Chapter 3

### Arriving Home/ Changes in Relationships

#### Military Children

Readjusting to family life can be a struggle not only for veterans and their spouses, but also for their children. Through a study conducted by the RAND Corporation, children with military parents experience emotional differences from civilian children (Karney & Crown, 2007). With heightened stressors including the constant possibility for relocating homes and the fear of losing a loved one, children in military families have higher average levels of behavioral and emotional difficulties. Repeated separation from deployed parents and the extensive time of the separations increase stress levels among military children. Dangers overseas are dangers to the families of deployed soldiers, and the effect of wartime casualties on *other* military families is often overlooked. In a time of danger for American soldiers, the fear of losing a spouse or parent is amplified, and can lead to emotional difficulties.

Currently, there are over 1.2 million American children with parents who are active duty worldwide. Of these children, eighty percent attend public schools. However, with a three times higher likelihood of moving to a new place and attending a new school than civilian children, many children are not given the opportunity to build relationships with friends and develop networks to support them during the deployment of a parent (Stanberry, 2011).

In the RAND study, over 1500 military children between the ages of 11 and 17 were interviewed extensively. Those conducting the study covered domains including family functioning, peer functioning, anxiety, academic and behavioral problems, and mental health. The results remained constant for every age group and concluded that emotional and behavioral problems were experienced at a significantly higher rate by the children of military parents in comparison to children with non-military parents. Clinical levels of anxiety were recognized in thirty percent of military children, nearly three times the rate of anxiety for the same aged children of the general US population. Of the children who had parents deployed, girls had more difficulty adjusting to their parent's deployment than the boys did, and older children had more difficulty than younger children. In addition, the length of deployment correlates directly with the extent of adjustment difficulties experienced by the children (Karney & Crown, 2007).

The increased stressors placed on these children play a key role in social functioning in day to day life. While the return of a deployed parent takes a large burden off of the veteran's children, the children will still show signs of heightened anxiety as a result of the learned behaviors while the parent was away (Frenz, 2007). These emotions and behaviors can lead to communication issues and family struggles.

However, over the past decade, the struggles of military children have been recognized by various groups who seek to alleviate some of the difficulties experienced by children of military families. For example, organizations such as The Department of Defense Education Activity and The Military Child Education Coalition have worked to ensure promising educational opportunities for children who undergo constant relocation and who must deal with family separation during a parent's deployment. But despite the

help provided by different organizations in limiting the difficulties children must face while a parent is deployed, the general population must also put forth extra effort to ensure that the children of military families feel appreciated and feel like there is a place in society where they belong (Chandra , Lara-Cinisomo, Jaycox, Tanielian, Burns, Han & Ruder, 2009) .

### **PTSD's Effect on Family Relations and Communication**

After experiencing traumatic or life threatening events while deployed with the military, many soldiers return home with an invisible burden known as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. PTSD is a psychological disorder that makes adjusting back to civilian life challenging for both the soldier dealing with the disorder, and his/her loved ones that must cope with it as well. Common effects of PTSD include reliving traumatic experiences through vivid memories, increased anxiety, difficulty sleeping, and relational issues ("Relationships and ptsd," 2007). While PTSD is a known disorder among soldiers and their families, many soldiers deny that they have it in order to avoid the negative social stigmas associated with it. As a result, only half of those who served in the military and suffer from PTSD seek help for it (Frenz, 2007). Consequently, many soldiers silently suffer from the disorder that can take a terrible toll on their lives. While the results of PTSD vary, and not all cases lead to relational problems, difficulties in relationships, both new and old, are common consequences of PTSD.

When soldiers with PTSD come home to family and friends, they often have trouble sustaining relationships at the level that they were before PTSD. Developing trust, feeling a sense of closeness, communicating, and problem solving all become difficult for

people with PTSD ("Relationships and ptsd," 2007). However, these characteristics are essential to developing and maintaining strong relationships. Friends and families must deal with the newfound struggles of the soldier, and as a result, they are challenged in the relationship as well. The actions of someone with PTSD affect the actions of others around him/her, and as a result, a circular pattern of problems arises. Loved ones often feel sad, angry, and hurt that the trauma has taken such a toll on the soldier, and their emotions lead them to feeling tense and more distant than what they once were.

On the Veterans Affairs website, detailed descriptions of PTSD and its effects are outlined for soldiers and their families. During the first months after developing PTSD, soldiers can show strong signs of anger, worry, and anxiety. They feel detached and like they do not belong. Over time, most people suffering from PTSD are able to resume closeness in relationships, but between five and ten percent of people with the disorder will have lasting problems that act as barriers to relationships.

Memories and flashbacks of the trauma can be triggered by a myriad of situations. Hearing certain words, seeing certain objects, or smelling certain odors can lead to a flashback or a panic attack. Therefore, loved ones need to learn to deal with situations in which the levels of anxiety are higher than what they are used to. Some people suffering from PTSD have intense nightmares that make them toss and turn throughout the night, denying them a chance to sleep well and in turn, denying their partner the ability to sleep restfully through the night. In addition, soldiers suffering from PTSD can be nervous and irritable, taking away from their chances to be relaxed and intimate with a partner. Many people with PTSD have an increased need to protect loved ones, but have less interest in social and sexual activities. Doing things that were fun and enjoyable before their

deployment may turn into something that brings anxiety and stress, and as a result, the soldier tries to avoid them.

Because of raised anger levels in soldiers with PTSD, verbal and physical violence occur in households more frequently than in households of veterans that do not suffer from the disorder ("Relationships and PTSD," 2007). Family violence is more common as a result of the heightened tensions and increased anger. Veterans with PTSD can react to even low levels of stress with full activation. These automatic responses to situations can cause problems for the veteran and for those around him/her. Impulsive responses to situations with a perceived danger can lead to aggressive behavior. In some cases, veterans have built up amplified beliefs through their experiences abroad. The breaking of these beliefs brings anger and dissatisfaction. For example, while certain order and communication styles are expected in the military and are all that a veteran has known for several months, veterans returning with PTSD sometimes expect the same order and communication at home. When these behaviors are not tended to, stress, anger, and dissatisfaction could result.

However, people with the disorder are not ignorant to the challenges they are facing and to their raised anger levels. Through avoiding closeness with others, they try to minimize problems and suppress anger. Some soldiers cope best with the disorder when left alone, and realize that negative consequences will result from spending time with friends and family. When meeting new people, survivors feel as though building relationships can be dangerous because getting close to someone leads to letting their guard down, and therefore opening oneself up to being hurt. However, avoidance only

hinders the healing process, and while redeveloping social behaviors may be difficult, it is essential to moving forward past the disorder.

In contrast, others rely heavily on care from others. These soldiers' substantial dependence on their partners or loved ones limits them from building the necessary blend of independence and sociability needed to combat the disorder. Many partners of PTSD veterans undertake a large portion of the duties that were once divided among the partners. This is known as the "caregiver's burden" and can include both objective and subjective problems (Frenz, 2007). Objective problems involve doing extra work or taking on more responsibility, around home or with the kids for example. Subjective problems involve the emotional difficulty that results from the added pressures of being the "caregiver." This burden is increased depending on the severity of the PTSD and can bring about psychiatric distress, dysphoria, and high levels of anxiety to the caregiver.

A number of studies have been conducted on relationships and how they are affected by Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Orthner, 2002). The studies have shown the negative impact of PTSD on families, marital adjustment, family functioning, and the mental health of partners. Male veterans with PTSD showed more parenting problems and more relational problems than male veterans without PTSD. Among the women veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, twenty percent have been diagnosed with PTSD. These women also experience relational issues when returning home from overseas ("Relationships and ptsd," 2007). Some relational problems could be a result of the soldier's anxiety toward intimacy. Soldiers with PTSD showed less self-disclosure not only to new acquaintances, but to loved ones with whom they have long standing relationships. This lack of disclosure results from a lack of trust and an inability to

communicate. Communication is an essential part of relationships, and if one member of the relationship is unable to communicate due to a lack of confidence or trust, the entire relationship is unable to grow.

As a result of the relational challenges faced by veterans with PTSD and their partners, the rate of divorce is two times greater for veterans with PTSD than for veterans without (Frenz, 2007). War has the ability to change people, and without the right help and the right understanding of the effects, maintaining relationships is a struggle. After Vietnam, thirty eight percent of marriages were split within six months of veterans' arrival home from Southeast Asia. Since then, programs have been put in place to help save marriages and prepare for changes, but soldiers returning with PTSD are more inclined to get divorced than those without it.

Partners of veterans with PTSD are also at risk to develop mental health issues of their own. Because of the stress built from the changing situations, more than half of the wives of male veterans with PTSD reported being at high risk for a nervous breakdown (Orthner 2005). With relational, emotional, and physical needs not being met as a result of the struggling communication and challenging relationship, the wives experience high stress levels. This is often referred to as "secondary traumatization" and can affect networks of people close to the PTSD victim.

In order to try and cope with the pains and struggles associated with PTSD, veterans with the disorder turn to a variety of methods of avoidance. However, emotional numbing and other avoidance symptoms lead to lower intimacy and can hinder communications with friends and family. Many people suffering from the disorder turn to drugs and alcohol to numb their anxiety, but as a result, they increase their level of

conflict with those close to them and bring about more disorder in their lives. More than twenty percent of veterans with PTSD have some level of Substance Use Disorder (SUD) and are twice as likely as veterans without the disorder to use nicotine regularly (Karney & Crown, 2007). While the use of drugs and alcohol can distract a veteran from his/her problems for a short time, it makes the overall transition back to quality mental health more difficult. Avoidance prolongs PTSD, and PTSD cannot be resolved unless it is confronted.

Because PTSD is a serious issue that can severely damage a veteran's mental health, physical health, emotional health, and relationships, it is essential that organizations around the country continue to search for ways to help deal with the transition from deployment back home. PTSD could affect as many as twenty percent of the soldiers fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan, so society must work to drop the negative stigma associated with PTSD and look for ways to help (Frenz, 2007).

### **Veteran Stigmas and Employment Opportunities**

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, more than 2.4 million Americans have served in either Iraq or Afghanistan with the United States military. American soldiers, in their time away on deployment, gain valuable hands on skills that could be useful in the civilian world. In addition, many deployed soldiers develop into effective leaders through their experiences leading other soldiers while abroad. However, a variety of factors limit veterans' opportunities to get jobs when they return back to the United States. Channeling one's skills and passions in the civilian world is often a

struggle for veterans because of emotional and mental difficulties resulting from deployment, or because of society's lack of support of veteran reintegration.

However, numerous organizations and services around the country have attempted to make American soldier's return home easier. Through job training and job searching programs, like "Hire a Hero" and "Military Hire", veterans are able to find job opportunities all over the country ("Family & caregiver support," 2013). But, only a limited number of businesses and organizations are aware of these online job finding tools, and the programs are fairly limited.

Even with a raised awareness on veteran unemployment, more employers around the country might not necessarily provide jobs to the veterans who risked their lives to ensure America's safety. Unfortunately, many employers deny veterans job opportunities due to the negative stigma that society has placed on veterans. Many employers hold the view that mental stressors and habits obtained on deployment will negatively affect the workplace. This stigma has led to widespread employment discrimination throughout the country.

Recent polls indicate a rise in privately held opinions that suggest that veterans in the workplace pose a security risk to employers and coworkers (Ousley, 2012). These beliefs result in discriminatory employment towards veterans, especially those who display signs of physical or mental injury that resulted from their time of deployment. This in turn forces veterans suffering from disorders like PTSD to keep their problems hidden from potential employers because they fear that revealing their problems could result in unemployment.

In addition, statements released by the Department of Homeland Security discourage employers from hiring returning veterans because of their malleability after traumatic experiences. Secretary of the DHS, Janet Napolitano made a statement that brought about high tensions in the veteran community. Her claim "that right-wing extremists will attempt to recruit and radicalize returning veterans...suffering from the psychological effects of war" has taken a spot in the media and resultantly discouraged employers from hiring veterans ("Rightwing extremism," 2009). Some people feel threatened by veterans, and rather than welcoming them home, they try to avoid them. These responses make a soldier's return home more difficult. With publicly held attitudes about mental disorders affecting veteran's work ethic and behavior, employers try to avoid negative situations by not hiring the veterans at all. According to the Department of Labor Current Population Survey, 32.9 percent of 18-24 year old veterans were unemployed in March of 2013 whereas only 14.8 percent of all 18-24 year olds in the United States were unemployed. In addition to physical and mental disorders obtained on deployment, inability to find jobs and discrimination by employers are added challenges for returning veterans. However, according to the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act of 1994, discrimination against veterans is illegal ("Uniformed services employment," 1994).

The USERRA was designed for non-career military men and women to be ensured employment opportunities without discrimination. By law, employers must provide a notice of rights, benefits, and obligations of persons under the USERRA to those persons. However, employers are often unaware of this law or simply disregard it. As a result, veterans are often let off from jobs at their most difficult times of

readjustment. For example, if a veteran is receiving treatment for a disability connected to his/her service, he/she may need more time off than is allotted for vacation and sick leave. This leaves the veteran with the difficult choice of continuing with treatment and getting fired, or stopping treatment to maintain employment.

Discrimination towards veterans has developed into a problem that makes returning home from deployment difficult. In order for veterans to provide for their families and successfully readjust back into civilian life, employers must adhere to USERRA regulations and must also put forth a little extra effort to provide veterans with a positive work environment. Employers need to look past the negative stigma placed on veterans so that a veteran struggling with PTSD or Traumatic Brain Injury does not have to avoid putting it down on a job application. Openness and acceptance must be present in the workplace in order to discontinue the back-door discrimination that veterans currently face.

### **Available Means of Help for Veterans and Families**

When faced with relational, communication, and readjustment problems, veterans are often not able to deal with them alone. Because these issues can only be experienced by the veterans and those close to them, it is important that veterans and their loved ones seek out treatment to resolve their issues, rather than continue to suffer the consequences of leaving them unattended. Throughout the country, there are multiple organizations that focus on serving veterans and their loved ones by providing them with help and counseling (Sanchez , 2011). In particular, the United States Department of Veterans Affairs provides the most support for veterans and their families. With health care,

education, loan, and insurance services, Veterans Affairs has a variety of ways to ease the lives of veterans returning from deployment. Thousands of employees make these services available, and a 24 hour Veterans Crisis Line allows veterans to call for help at any time of the day. However, because of the high number of claims filed by veterans over the past decade, a backlog of files has limited the abilities of some VA offices. This backlog has led to average waiting periods for resolving disability claims to be over 275 days. Since 2009, over four million claims have been processed. The continual increase in claims has led to insufficient space and staffing to support so many new files (Tobia, 2013). However, despite the sluggishness of some offices, Veterans Affairs remains instrumental in assisting veterans in reintegration.

One of the most helpful and highly used services provided by Veterans Affairs is the “Vet Center.” After realizing that a significant number of Vietnam veterans were still having difficulty readjusting back into society in the United States, Congress established the Vet Center Program in 1979. Vet Centers are community based and scattered all across the United States. Their main purpose is to help veterans make a successful post-war adjustment back to civilian life through counseling, outreach programs, and referral services. Vet Centers offer their services to anyone who has served in the United States military in any military conflict since WWII. In addition, family members of eligible veterans are also able to make use of Vet Center services.

Readjustment counseling includes a wide range of services for veterans and their families. Both individual and group counseling are available as well as family counseling for issues related to a veteran’s military service. Since August 5, 2003, Vet Centers have also offered bereavement counseling to the families of soldiers who died while on active

duty. This counseling supports people who have psychological and emotional stress after the passing of a loved one. Another form of therapy offered by Vet Centers is Military Sexual Trauma counseling. This helps veterans deal with sexual trauma and regain confidence by having group, marital, and family counseling sessions to help suppress the issue. Vet Centers also hold events to allow veterans to become more involved in the community, and the centers can make assessments and referrals for substance abuse.

Because the employees of Vet Centers appreciate and understand veteran's war experiences, they are able to assist veterans and their families in a caring manner. Since their creation in 1979, Vet Centers have helped millions of veterans readjust into society after experiencing firsthand the horrors of war.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Communication Theory and Changing Relationships**

#### **Communication Patterns Defining Relationships**

All relationships are mediated through communication. Whether face-to-face dialogue, writing, signing, or non-verbal communication, some form of communication is essential to the building and maintenance of relationships. Communication scholars Berger and Kellner view all “relationships as conversations” (Rogers, 2008). Everything that is said or done in a relationship has a specific meaning that relates to the members of the relationship or the relationship as a whole. The interwoven nature of communication and relationships make functioning relationships impossible without communication.

According to the Relational Communication Theory, advanced by L. Edna Rogers, relationships are shaped through the communicative processes of the relational members (Rogers, 2008). These processes are based off of the communicative behaviors of the people in a relationship. They include the content which is communicated in a relationship, the way in which it is communicated, and how each messages relates to other messages in the relationship. The nature of the relationship itself influences the continual communication between the people in that relationship, and the way in which people communicate expresses the behaviors that define relationships. The communication behaviors of both members of the relationship have mutual influence on

the relationship itself. Whether these behaviors are assertiveness or timidity, each communication behavior plays a role in how the relationship functions.

Individual messages play a key role in all relationships. However, individual messages combined together define relationships. The individual messages make up patterns and those patterns influence the relational lives of the members of a relationship.

The Relational Communication Theory makes three main claims (Rogers, 2008). The first claim states that communication behaviors allow people to interrelate. Because each person has a different communication behavior, the compatibility of mixing behaviors allows for strength in a relationship. The second claim states that communication is a formative process. Communication is susceptible to change through the growth and development of a relationship. The final claim states that defined patterns of communication form relational systems. These communication patterns have ramifications that influence the successfulness of relationships. The patterns are interrelated, so that a relationship is not defined by particular events or messages, but by a system of behaviors.

This system is made up of the mutual relatedness of its parts. In relationships, the system is communication, and its parts are all of the messages relayed within the relationship. The interdependency of the different aspects of communication make the system as a whole greater than the sum of its parts.

While veterans are deployed, their communication behaviors may change as a result of communication barriers and traumatic events experienced abroad. When they arrive home, the communication behaviors that once “fit together” with the communication behaviors of their friends and family may cause new tensions that did not

exist before. The incompatibility of communication behaviors leads to the weakening of relationships. This can be explained by the formative nature of communication. However, rather than the relationship's communication changing for the betterment of a relationship, it negatively affects the relationship. New patterns can be formed by the series of messages that make up the relationship, and old patterns that worked before can lose their meaning.

Feedback is a tool used to maintain, change, or modify relationships. Feedback regulates the information in a conversation and allows relational members to gain understanding of how the other party is processing the information. Feedback can also explain distancing. Distancing is the way that someone expresses how close or distant he/she feels in a relationship (Rogers 2008). For example, when a veteran returns home and has trouble revealing deep information to his/her significant other, the significant other may say "I miss when you used to tell me everything." The veteran may distance himself/herself by responding with "I just need more time to think about things. I still love you." Both of these messages offer two levels of meaning. In the first message, message content reveals that deep conversations are missed, but the way in which the message is said is a relational message that reveals sadness or disappointment that things are not as they once were. In the veteran's response, asking for more time to think is a distancing tool, but the added comment, "I love you" shows that he/she still cares.

Relationships can be described by their levels of symmetry and complementarity. In symmetrical relationships, communication behaviors of relational members mirror one another. In complimentary relationships, behaviors fit together despite their differences. For example, a complimentary relationship could exist if one person gives advice and the

other accepts it. Before veterans deploys, his/her relationships may have certain levels of symmetry and complementarity. However, when he/she arrives home, changed communication behaviors can change the flow of relationships. A veteran could return and be more outspoken after deployment or more timid after deployment. Both changes will affect the flow of the relationship. The ideal relationship includes a mix of both symmetry and complementarity with a mix of assertiveness and a willingness to accept suggestions. However, changed communicative processes could negatively influence a relationship to suffer or discontinue.

### **Effects of a Changed Sense of Affection in Relationships**

Relationships are maintained and developed through affection. Affection is necessary for both the health of a relationship as a whole and for the health of the people in the relationship. Whether the affection is expressed through acts of hugging, kissing, holding hands, or saying "I love you," expressions of affection are important to relationships and often define crucial relational turning points. For example, a first kiss could indicate the start of a romantic interest. However, once a relationship has been defined, continuation of affectionate acts of communication is necessary for maintaining the same relational status. According to a study done by Floyd, Hess, Miczo, Halone, Mikkelson, and Tusing (2005), highly affectionate people have higher self-esteem, life satisfaction, and mental health, and are less susceptible to depression and stress.

While soldiers are serving on deployment, they are unable to show physical affection to their loved ones. Because deployed soldiers can be away from physical contact with their loved ones for several months at a time, both emotional and

physiological consequences could result. According to the Affectionate Exchange Theory, introduced by Kory Floyd in 2001, affection is crucial to maintaining relationships, and ultimately to the continuation of the human race. While not all affectionate communication is demonstrated physically, direct physical affection plays a large role in preserving relationship quality in intimate relationships. However, other forms of affection such as verbal affection and indirect nonverbal affection are still possible while soldiers are abroad. Verbal affection includes the use of language, whether in speaking or writing, to show affection. This could include things like telling someone “I love you” or “you are important in my life.” As discussed previously, modern technology has made communication between soldiers and their loved ones almost instant, regardless of both party’s location in the world. Indirect nonverbal communication can indicate affection through behaviors. This could include something as simple as sending a soldier a care package to express gratitude. These acts of communication allow soldiers and their loved ones to express some sort of affection in a time when physical affection is not possible.

However, the significance of physical affection in relationships cannot be neglected. This could have an impact on soldier’s relationships both while they are away on deployment and when they return home.

The Affectionate Exchange Theory, or AET, assumes that communication is influenced by both socially constructed norms and by biology. Floyd claims that the “need and capacity for affection are inborn” (Floyd, 2001). Therefore, humans have an innate ability and need to feel affection. Without affection, the body reacts both physically, through stress and lowered immune system functioning, and mentally,

through depression and mental discomfort. Conversely, benefits result from the acts of giving and receiving affection.

While a soldier is away, other aspects of life can fog a soldier's sense of affection. AET also makes the assumption that "affectionate feelings and affectionate expression are distinct experiences that often, but do not always, covary." With this, Floyd claims that there is a clear difference between the behaviors that create affection and the emotional experiences of affection. For example, people are able to express affection without feeling any sense of affection. This is a common result of politeness and following social norms. Affectionate norms are shaped by culture and are sometimes mistakenly assumed. Likewise, someone may be able to experience affection without displaying those feelings. This could take place when a soldier feels a particular way about someone back home, but cannot effectively convey those feelings through letters, email, phone calls, or social media. In either circumstance, an inability to fully express or understand affection can seriously harm relationships.

When a soldier arrives home, physical affection can once again be shared between the soldier and his/her loved ones. However, transitioning back to the same levels of affection in a relationship is not always easy. In some cases, one partner in an intimate relationship could have a lower need for physical affection than the other. This could be a result of the extended period of time that the relationship continued without it. Also, many veterans who have experienced traumatic events while deployed suffer from a lowered sex-drive. Lowered sex-drive and sexual dysfunction that result from PTSD or other disorders can cause serious problems among partners. Affection is essential in

intimate relationships, and when the need for affection seems not to exist, relationships are more likely to fail.

One of Floyd's propositions in the Affectionate Exchange Theory suggests that "humans vary in optimal tolerance for affection." This idea is validated by people's change in desirable affection over time. While intimate relationships between soldiers and their partners were at the optimal level of affection before the soldier's deployment, the soldier's experiences abroad can decrease his/her optimal level of affection. While high levels of affection normally show emotional and physiological benefits, in some situations, people can have a negative response to an overdose of affection and can feel uncomfortable and stressed. As a result, the soldier's partner can experience a feeling that they are not loved as much. However, with available counseling, optimal levels of affection can be restored, and relationships can be rebuilt to be stronger than they were before.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusion**

As a veteran returns from serving overseas, reintegration back into civilian life is challenging. When a veteran encounters challenges returning to life in the United States, loved ones must share the burden. A veteran's communication and emotional issues can lead to relational issues among family and friends. These issues, whether a result of a veteran's formed sense of identity, communication while abroad, or psychological disorders developed through traumatic experiences abroad, can take years to overcome. The stress of having a parent away on deployment leads to higher levels of anxiety in children, and the parent's return home is often more difficult than expected. While means of help are available to veterans and their families, society must encourage the use of these services by eliminating the negative stigma placed on veterans suffering from disorders that delay comfortable reintegration.

The lack of physical affection while abroad and the experiencing of certain traumatic events can lead to difficulty showing affection upon a veteran's return. This can harm relationships because a lack of affection leads to the feeling that there is less love in a relationship. Because communication is the main tool used in relationships, trouble communicating is one of the main causes of relational dissolution. Through an increased emphasis on the significance of restoring person to person communication in relationships, a veteran can return home with a little more comfort.

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# Academic Vita

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**EDUCATION:** **The Pennsylvania State University, College of Liberal Arts** University Park, PA  
 Bachelor of Arts- Communication Arts and Sciences, International Studies Class of 2013  
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**LEADERSHIP:** **Habitat for Humanity** Penn State  
*Volunteer and Building Coordinator/ Spring Break trip leader* 2012-2013

- Helped coordinate the building of a local home
- Organized numerous Rent-A-Worker programs to assist members in the community
- Led a group of fourteen students in building a home in Dade City, Florida over spring break

**THON** Penn State  
*Hospitality Committee Member/ Cadet (Second in Charge), Operations Committee Member/* 2010 – 2013  
*Airbands Committee Chair, Donor Alumni Relations Committee Member/ Celebrations Chair*

- Prepared/ led Arts and Crafts weeks and served meals throughout THON weekend
- Organized, choreographed, led, and problem solved the Airbands Event
- Set up, tore down, cleaned up, and took part in all major events leading up to and including THON, a forty-six hour dance marathon

**German Club** Lansdale, PA  
*President* 2008 – 2009

- Found new members, sold advent calendars, organized student exchange program, organized various trips, planned the German Honorary Induction, planned and led monthly meetings

**Student Government** Lansdale, PA  
*Class Cabinet Member* 2007 – 2009

- Prepared all major events and fundraisers for a class of 1100, including dances, car washes, plant sales, the senior trip, and graduation

**Special Olympics** Lansdale, PA  
*Leader and Organizer* 2007 – 2009

- Helped organize the only high school student run Special Olympics in the country, oversaw activities throughout the day, sorted out problems faced by participants and workers, organized opening ceremonies

**EXPERIENCE:** **Hatfield Manufacturing** Hatfield, PA  
*Floor Manager* 2007-2013

- Manufactured gutter covers, packaged and shipped product, took inventory, oversaw workers, fixed machine, met with Mastershield Gutter Cover owners and discussed company status

**Semester Study Abroad** Freiburg, Germany  
 2012

- Spent the Spring 2012 semester studying the European Union in Freiburg, Germany. Through multiple field trips to EU countries and institutions, became more culturally aware and built a more global perspective

### HONORS:

- Michael Hodes Scholarship Recipient (2011-2012)
- The President's Freshman Award for a 4.0 GPA (2009)
- Dean's list each semester (Penn State)
- German Honorary Inductee for Delta Phi Alpha (2011)
- Communication Arts and Sciences speech contest finalist (2011)
- Engineering Design contest finalist (2010)