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Living Liminal Lives: Army Partners' Spatiotemporal Experiences of Deployment

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Abstract

The emotional cycle of deployment theorized by Logan and adapted by Pincus, House, Christenson, and Alder is often applied by academics and military support agencies to define, explain, and provide advice on the experiences and possible emotional reactions of military families during phases of deployment. Interviews with army partners showed that spatiotemporal experiences and perspectives are more complex than those afforded by the emotional cycle of deployment. This article argues that applying the concept of liminality uncovers some of this complexity, illuminating the in-between times experienced during deployments that are otherwise hidden. Army partners move through and between deployments and deployment phases haunted by specters of past and future deployments. By disrupting seemingly chronological and discrete spatiotemporal narratives, which often frame research on military families and deployment, this article demonstrates how army partners move through and between deployments and deployment stages negotiating past and future deployments. It shows how they continuously adapt and evolve practices while negotiating interpreted pasts and imagined futures in pursuit of becoming “ideal.”

Keywords

sociology, deployment, liminality, army partners, postdeployment, family issues

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Nonserving partners of military personnel can experience various challenges when managing deployments, particularly as they adapt and adjust their roles within the family home (Lapp et al., 2010). Discrete, chronological time periods are often used in research and practice to frame discussions around their experiences of deployment. This is exemplified by the “emotional cycle of deployment” model, adapted by Pincus et al. (2001), organizing deployment into stages: “predeployment,” “deployment,” “sustainment,” “redeployment,” and “postdeployment.” Through thematic analysis of interviews with 26 army partners, this article demonstrates how this model, which relies on a chronological conception of discrete times, is limited in its utility of framing experiences of time around deployment. Through applying the concept of liminality, the often taken-for-granted emotional cycle of deployment is troubled by considering time-space in-between discrete times and spaces the model represents.

The concept of liminality is receiving renewed attention from scholars (Thomassen, 2016). Liminality refers to transition, broadly understood as the state of ambiguity and disorientation in-between separation from a social order (preliminal) and reincorporation with another social order (postliminal; Thomassen, 2016; Turner, 1967). By foregrounding ambiguous liminal times experienced by army partners, this article explores the qualitative implications of how their present is affected by their interpretation of their pasts and imagined futures. Rather than relying on the chronological emotional cycle of deployment, which infers a beginning, progression, and end, partners’ experiences are more complex as they may be haunted by future deployments and lingering, dormant outcomes of past deployments. For example, role handover is cursory postdeployment as partners maintain a state of readiness for imagined future deployments, a strategy often learned from previous separations.

As much military-provided support is organized around the deployment cycle, building understandings of how deployments are experienced by army partners is important. While the emotional cycle of deployment is useful in framing broad experiences in terms of military-times through deployment, it relies on militarized framings of time and space which simplify the complexity of experiences and labor of partners. Through exploring liminal spatiotemporalities, this article develops present understandings of UK-based army partners’ experiences and labor around deployments. This is particularly useful as UK-focused qualitative research is limited. Indeed, whilst there is some research which considers partners’ experiences of deployment, it often focuses on those living overseas (Dandeker et al., 2006; Hyde, 2016) and other research focuses on the acute effects of war, often through a positivist-leaning lens. This research uses a qualitative, interpretivist methodology, taking a life-history approach, enabling UK-based army partners to reflect on other periods of their lives, drawing connections with their present.

The article begins with an overview of the emotional cycle of deployment, followed by a discussion on time, space, and liminality to highlight the limitations of the model. It then provides an overview of military partner roles and identities to

show how deployments and operational imperatives structure roles, impacting microlevel interactions. It then outlines the methodology, before presenting data and discussion of implications.

The Emotional Cycle of Deployment

The emotional cycle of deployment, theorized by Logan (1987), is a model outlining U.S. Navy wives' experiences of deployment. It has been adapted since, notably by U.S. military psychiatrists (Pincus et al., 2001) who extended the model's application to military family members across all services. Although Logan's (1987) model proposes seven stages of deployment, Pincus et al. (2001) describe five stages identified by discrete time periods which are organized by military happenings around the absence/presence of the serving person and associated emotional challenges. Movement through the model appears chronological with a start, middle, and end. It is argued that knowledge of these stages enables families to "normalize" and cope with deployment (see Harnett, 2013). This article raises concerns not to dismiss the utility of the model but to extend its utility by rethinking connections between stages, disrupting the model's assumed linearity, making space for recognizing complexity and "mess" (Law, 2004).

Upon announcement of deployment, the first stage of the model is "predeployment" which may involve anticipation of loss, training of the serving person, preparation for absence, and mental/physical distance. The second stage is "deployment" (first month) which may involve mixed emotions/relief, disorientation, a sense of being overwhelmed, numbness, and sleeping difficulties. The third stage is "sustainment" (majority of deployment), which may involve new routines being established, new sources of support, a sense of independence, and confidence. The fourth stage is "redeployment" (last month of deployment) which may involve anticipation of homecoming, excitement, and difficulty making decisions. The final stage is "postdeployment" (3–6 months after return), which may involve a honeymoon period, new routines, and reintegration into the family.

The model has been influential, as it is used to frame discussions around families' experiences of deployment (e.g., Lincoln & Sweeton, 2011; Pye & Simpson, 2017; White et al., 2011). It also influences British welfare provision, advising families what to expect and how to manage challenges pre, during, and postdeployment (e.g., Ministry of Defence [MoD] 2020a; Naval Families Federation, 2019) and a recent MoD-commissioned report on the needs of military families reinforces its prominence (Walker et al., 2020). The model is common sense, appealing to familiarities around chronological orderings of time, so its influence is unsurprising. However, some research has alluded to the limitations of reviewing experience according to these discrete times. For example, one quantitative study in the U.S. explored turning points of marital satisfaction experienced by military partners within each phase of the deployment cycle (Parcell & Maguire, 2014). It showed that there are multiple trajectories within each phase and that experiences of marital satisfaction cannot be

framed in the broad categories the model offers. Additionally, Faber et al. (2008) looked at how partners of U.S. reservists experienced the absence of their serving partner. They considered Boss' (2007) concept of ambiguous presence—when a family member is perceived as physically present but psychologically absent—to show how families experience loss outside of the deployment stage. They focused on the postdeployment phase, but the concept of ambiguous presence can be applied across deployment stages and beyond to further complexify the model. Norris (2001) contends that the emotional cycle of deployment obscures practices enacted by female military partners by presenting deployment as a discrete event. By doing so, the model presents deployment as something which *happens* as military phenomena, but it is actually made possible through the labor of nonserving partners.

Time and Space

The emotional cycle of deployment is organized around event-based time as it embraces militarized times, where stages are defined by chronological, process-oriented, military events (organizational practices) which enable deployment. Particularly, it is organized around the envisioned chronological transition of the service person from their home to the deployment zone, their attendance in the deployment zone, and their hoped-for return. Deployments can cause tensions between the military and family institutions as they compete for the service person's time, presence, and attention (Dandeker et al., 2006; Segal, 1986). While the emotional cycle of deployment presents the possible emotional experiences of nonserving family members around deployment stages, by organizing these around militarized event-based times, it obscures the complexity of how these times might be experienced differently by partners. Indeed, philosophers and social scientists have long troubled the concept of quantitative, measurable time (e.g., clock time) to highlight how time is experienced, moving beyond linear, chronological underpinnings (e.g., Glucksmann, 1988; Hassard, 2016). Notably, Adam (2010) stated:

Contemporary daily life [...] is conducted in the temporal domain of open and fluid pasts and futures, mindful of the lived past and projectively oriented towards the "not yet." [...] Without giving much thought to the matter, we alternate perspectives between anticipated future presents and enacted present futures. (pp. 361–362)

Individuals relate and develop meanings, behaviors, and practices through perspectives of pasts and futures. This articulation of time-experienced challenges linear, chronological conceptualizations underpinning the emotional cycle of deployment. Previous research conducted within the U.S. has shown that military partners experience various stressors associated with time around deployment including the feeling that life is "on hold" during the predeployment stage, and a sense of "waiting" during deployment (Lapp et al., 2010), alluding to the ways in which present time is affected by anticipated futures. By foregrounding army

partners' experiences of time through deployments, understandings of the "hitherto unscrutinized temporality of military life" (Hockey, 2017, p. 91) are advanced, facilitating space for complexity through exploring how interpreted pasts and imagined futures are manifest in the present.

While this article primarily deals with complexifying experiences of time, time is inextricably linked with space (Taylor, 2009). The emotional cycle of deployment indirectly relies upon the demarcation between the home and deployment zone which occupies spatial domains. The home refers to the family home (assumed to be occupied by the nonserving partner and children), while deployment zone refers to the movement of military personnel and equipment, through space (e.g., combat zones). This has been challenged by Hyde (2016) who considered the spatial-temporal register of militarization, showing that deployments are manifest in partners' everyday lives. Hyde offered examples of frequent communication between the combat zone and home front (re)creating the presence/absence of loved ones in different spaces through letters, calls, and pictures pinned to bedroom walls. Also, the combat zone impacted everyday family life when two soldiers were killed, prompting a communication blackout with wives being unable to gain formal information and relying on televised news and rumor. Here, the event is paused while simultaneously time *happens* in the home front, blurring boundaries between the home and combat zone. Hyde (2016, p. 865) concludes that "militarisation—as a state of being, as a lived experience—is nothing if not the very conflation and confusion of military and civilian, the simultaneous coexistence of multiple times and spaces, a grey area." Although this article focuses primarily on the troubling of time, the blurring of military and civilian space is an important reflection that features in the data and discussions below.

Liminality

Through applying the concept of liminality, we can look in-between the simplistic categorization of spatiotemporalities underpinning models like the emotional cycle of deployment. As aforementioned, liminality broadly refers to ambiguity between preliminal and postliminal states as an individual is in a state of in-betweenness (Turner, 1967). It is usefully applied toward developing understandings of transition, highlighting individuals being in-between what was previously known and the unknown. For example, a person might experience liminality as they leave education and have not yet secured their next role. During this limbo state, individuals' roles, statuses, and understandings of self are considered ambiguous, separated from the preliminal, and are yet to be realigned with the stabilizing postliminal. Liminal periods are evident when social hierarchies are revised or temporarily dissolved, continuity with tradition becomes uncertain, and future outcomes are thrown into doubt (Thomassen, 2009). Liminality can be usefully applied toward developing understandings of how army partners experience transitions through and in-between deployments and deployment stages.

Liminality has both temporal and spatial dimensions, and taking these seriously can further enhance our understandings of transition and the adjustments individuals make to manage change. Thomassen (2009) states that liminal temporalities can refer to moments, periods, or epochs and spatial dimensions including specific places (a front door), areas (borders between nations), or large regions (continents). This article uniquely applies the concept of liminality to understand army partners' experiences of in-between times and spaces (Thomassen, 2009, 2016) and their reactions to ambiguity through reflections of pasts and futures (Adam, 2010).

Military Partner Roles and Identities

Before outlining the methodology and findings, it is important to briefly explore research on military partners' roles and identities around deployments. This article's interest in army partners' spatiotemporal experiences around deployments is underpinned by interest in how their practice/labor, in these spatiotemporalities, enables deployments to happen (Norris, 2001). Militaries require partners' gendered labor to make deployments possible. Through tracing histories of military wives/partners, Enloe (1983, 2000) showed that their labor has been deliberately maneuvered by military leaders to maximize operational effectiveness through molding them to perform gendered roles. Examples include taking primary responsibility for domestic labor and childcare, caregiving for their returned serving partner, and supporting them to remain deployable (Gray, 2017; Harrison & Laliberté, 1993; Hyde, 2016). Partners negotiate the liminal space between their military/civilian identities, at times resisting and/or adhering to militarization (Baaz & Verweijen, 2017; Hyde, 2016).

Gendered ideals hold military partners accountable to expectations of their militarized role. The "ideal/good/model" military partner performs this labor, exhibiting militarized values of stoicism and resilience, to support their serving partner and military objectives (Enloe, 2000; Gray, 2017; Harrison & Laliberté, 1993). Contradicting these ideals can be met with derision from the community as Gray (2017, p. 233) illustrates "... several interview participants painted a picture of an insufficiently stoic, *failed* military wife—a figure who was widely seen as an object of scorn." Enloe (2000) argued that these ideals have been maneuvered so effectively by military officials that often they are internalized and considered natural. While partners' labor is integral to the functioning of some militaries, their needs are rendered secondary/tertiary to those of their serving partner/military, as they are denied equal membership—only being eligible for housing/welfare as partner-of (Gray, 2016).

Therefore, partners may be considered to be within a liminal position between "military" and "civilian," as they blur the seemingly distinct dualism; they are civilian, military, and, at the same time, neither. It is with this framing this article considers army partners' labor. This labor is considered as them performing

gendered, militarized identities, where labor is foundational to making war possible. The next section outlines the study background and methodology, followed by discussion of liminal spatiotemporalities.

Study Background and Methodology

Thomassen (2016, p. 5) stated that “to take liminality seriously means to take experience seriously.” Army partners’ lived experiences of deployment are foregrounded in this study to explore their experiences of liminal spatiotemporalities. Findings discussed are based on research undertaken between 2015 and 2019.¹ This broader research aimed to focus on the postdeployment stage, but it became clear that army partners struggled to speak only of this experience as they regularly reflected on other times and stages of deployments. Semistructured interviews were conducted, lasting 60–90 min, enabling partners to raise issues important to them, facilitating space to tell their own narrative in a way that made sense to them. This research took a life-history approach, enabling participants to explore how their pasts impacted their present (Bryman, 2012; Yeandle, 1987). This approach moved interviews beyond thinking about a singular deployment stage or deployment, as partners reflected on the effects of previous deployments and imagined futures, which was integral to developing an understanding of how they experience liminal times.

It is worthwhile highlighting that I am a member of the military community, a partial insider (Chavez, 2008), and consider this coproduced research as benefiting from some shared experiences. Embracing one’s insiderness can strengthen research by further enabling mutual understandings between the researcher and researched, identify deviations from researcher expectations in the data, gain access to difficult-to-access institutions, and develop conclusions that are understandable to researcher and researched (Kirke, 2013). However, it is important that empathy is not overstated as it can lead to assumptions that one can claim absolute understanding of another, ignoring difference, and appropriation of another’s stories (Lather, 2009). Empathy is instead an outcome of the connections made between the researcher and participant where lived experiences are negotiated and meaning created is co-constituted, rather than truth-telling. I encouraged participants to speak as though I were an outsider, asking them to expand upon phrases such as “you know all of this.” I maintained a diary to reflect on how my experiences were entangled with the research and discussed this with supervisors, intending to mitigate personal bias.

Upon gaining ethical approval from Lancaster University, 26 army partners were interviewed; they were recruited through advertisement online (social media), attendance at military-organized events, and snowballing. With over 90% of service spouses being female (MOD, 2020b), it is unsurprising that all who responded, and thus interviewed were female; their serving partners were male, regulars in the British Army. Due to the gendered implications around military partners, I cannot comment on how these findings may relate to other populations, men, for example.

Future research should endeavor to explore these comparatively underrepresented perspectives.

Each participant's serving partner had deployed at least once to Iraq and/or Afghanistan since 2001. Nine could not remember the number of deployments experienced—perhaps showing how normalized absence/presence of their serving partner was—while others ranged between one and seven (including Iraq, Afghanistan, and others). Twenty-five participants were married and one was unmarried but in a long-term relationship.² The majority had children of various ages, mostly biological to both parents, and two had stepchildren. Some participants were unemployed and others worked in roles related to teaching and health care, for example. A minority had managerial roles. Three were employed by organizations providing support to military families, so although not discussed in this article, we can expect that their perspectives might be affected somewhat by these knowledges/experiences. All participants lived in the UK, the majority in England, mostly in military housing. Their partners included a range of ranks and while not the focus here, it is worthwhile noting that rank can affect expectations of labor, for example, officers' partners may be expected to provide a supportive role to others. All participants have been given pseudonyms.

Most interviews were conducted face-to-face in coffee shops and welfare spaces, and some were via the telephone/Skype, accommodating participants' busy schedules. Often, they brought their children with them, or were audible in the background of calls, which afforded further insight into their lives showing how they balanced childcare responsibilities with other activities.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed to a level of intelligent verbatim, with transcripts uploaded to NVivo (version 11) and thematically analyzed using a grounded approach. I organized data into codes, refined these, and then organized them into categories indicating dominant themes. Codes were developed from the data, rather than data being assigned to preset codes, allowing for unanticipated findings to emerge (Charmaz, 2000). Coding was an iterative process, as I weaved through the data, reviewing the framework to ensure best fit (Arksey & Knight, 2009). As coding progressed, themes emerged around army partners' experiences of deployments and their coping strategies. These themes were reviewed alongside the data and codes to ensure meanings were "trustworthy."

It is inappropriate to generalize these findings to all army partners as I am not presenting "facts," rather I am calling for further nuance in understanding deployment-related experiences. I am not suggesting that all army partners react to liminality in the same ways described in this article. Indeed, opportunities for reflexivity and reimagining futures are inherent within liminal periods, which can lead to a variety of outcomes (Shields, 2003; Thomassen, 2016). Instead, I aim to demonstrate how the concept of liminality can be used to elucidate in-between spatiotemporalities, complexifying experiences of deployments.

From thematically analyzing codes that emerged around challenges experienced, it became clear that army partners' spatiotemporal experiences of deployment were

more complex than originally anticipated. Although the purpose of this research was to explore partners' experiences of challenges faced postdeployment, they struggled to speak only of this discrete time period and instead told stories of how other times impacted their experiences. Applying the concept of liminality enabled rich insight into their experiences of negotiating deployments and demonstrates how this elucidates *some* of the complexity concerning their spatiotemporal experiences. Data presented have been chosen for exemplifying complexities around three themes: "interpreting previous deployments and separations," "imagining future deployments and separations," and "ambiguity between deployment stages" (e.g., predeployment, during deployment, and postdeployment).

Interpreting Previous Deployments and Separations

The next two sections demonstrate how army partners experience liminality as their practice is affected by interpretations of their past and their imagined futures. This section focuses on interpretations of previous deployments and separations, as for many partners, their past experiences impacted their perspectives of, and practice in, the present. Many partners experienced multiple deployments and other separations and described how "lessons" were learned and applied to their strategies to manage present and future separations. Through these descriptions, experiences of time around the deployments were complexified as stages were informed by the past and practices evolved.

The most common lesson described related to ensuring that they could run households on their own, without their serving partner. Strategies were practical and included becoming and being the primary account holder for bills, ensuring that employment accommodates for potential childcare needs and developing skills which they thought in a civilian family would likely be "his job." For example, speaking about developing skills, Patricia said, "I made a few mistakes, but I did manage to plumb the washing machine in [. . .] I just think it makes you a little bit stronger." A few considered their roles and skills development as empowering as they did not consider some tasks as being traditionally done by women, for example, changing fuses and dealing with car maintenance. Yet, their labor is gendered, focused on ensuring that the household runs seamlessly, regardless of military requirements of their serving partner—smoothing the ruptures in the home caused by deployments (Hyde, 2016). Indeed, these skills were developed to mitigate the effects of fluctuation/transition and were considered evidential of their overcoming of military-imposed disruption. Their multiple experiences of deployments and separations enabled them to build upon these skills, reaching toward becoming more independent, which they associated with their ability to cope.

Paradoxically, some said that previous experiences taught them that presenting an overly independent and "smooth-running" household to their returned serving partner could cause tension:

Poor blokes come home and they just want to be feel counted and feel important, but of course for the last six months they haven't been counted and they haven't been important. What they have been is maybe a weekly phone call. (Natasha)

Some created stories about not being able to manage certain aspects, giving him a role to slot back into, making him feel wanted and necessary (and as will be discussed shortly, this is done while ensuring that they could pick up tasks again during future absences). For example, Ruby encouraged her partner to read to their children, saying that "they are really interested in it," to make him feel needed and wanted.

Participants also learned to manage their own expectations during the various stages of deployment due to previous experiences. They learned that deployments could be challenging and continually developed strategies to keep busy—occupying time by attending events organized by military support, gaining employment that works around childcare requirements, and building social networks. Molly said that she managed deployments and separations through "keeping busy, moving around, not sitting on the end waiting for telephone calls." These strategies aimed to distract themselves from worrying about their serving partner and their living through military event-based time, and evidence them trying to speed up this liminal time.

Many said that through previous experiences, they learned that the honeymoon period postdeployment does not last. For example, Tracy said that she had learned to manage her expectations of her serving partner's return as work demands do not stop: It is "about managing expectations [. . .] that's what we've learned over time [. . .] I used to find that very frustrating that he had to sit down in front of the computer [to work]."

Another lesson learned revolved around engaging with friends and family throughout and not being "the lonely wife." All participants reflected on how they related to being the lonely wife—whether it described them now (they thought they needed to change), their past selves (how important it was that they had changed), or others (how they should change):

I've been the young wife, I've been the naïve wife, I've been the lonely wife, so I knew what I had to do, 'cos I knew we'd probably be here for quite a while, so I went out with an army wife, met some people and built my network that way. (Anna)

Engaging with other partners was considered beneficial, especially for those with less experience of deployment as advice could be shared, showing how time lines and life histories between army partners overlap. For some, their first experience of a deployment is affected by their understanding of others' experiences:

Me grandma has instilled it into me mum and me to be strong independent women, like you don't actually need a man, he's never there [. . .] because they were serving, and it's one of the best lessons I ever learned. (Karianne)³

These examples show how army partners can be haunted by previous deployments and separation, impacting their present. They show how previous experiences and time blur into their present, as they continually test their coping strategies, evolving them as experiences grow to make separations more manageable. They learn from their and other's past experiences. They continually adapt strategies for managing the effect of separation on their family and could be considered in a liminal space where they are in pursuit of becoming ideal (e.g., Gray, 2017).

Imagining Future Deployments and Separations

The most notable example of imagined futures affecting present practice is that although army partners hand over responsibilities to their serving partner postdeployment, they commonly transfer responsibilities that they know they can take on again with ease if/when they are separated again. Their practices postdeployment, although presenting an image of reintegration, are temporary as many anticipate future absence caused by deployments or otherwise:

I always try to keep my routine the same, so like even when he's here I don't necessarily rely on him, so you know I work the hours that I work so that I can pick the kids up regardless of if he's here or not. (Patricia)

The previous section showed that this practice is partly informed by past experiences where partners learned that they can mitigate disruption caused by the changing absence/presence of their serving partner by endeavoring to become more independent. Yet the quotation above, echoing many other interviewees, shows that this maintenance of independence is enacted to manage imagined futures too; they are in a state of readiness, living future deployments/separations.

Due to awareness of future military requirements, some described their concerns that manifestations of previous deployments might negatively affect their serving partner's operational readiness. Specifically, some worried that dormant mental health issues relating to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), considered caused by their serving partner's past experiences, could surface years after their return. Formal support services directly mobilize this by describing how army partners might "look for signs" in postdeployment family briefings. Participants described how they would keep a watchful eye on their serving partner to identify possible signs and noticed echoes of previous deployments. For example, Ruby said that when her serving partner returns from "high tempo" deployments—where he might have witnessed or been a part of violence—she looks for these signs and continues to years after his return. She encourages him to speak to welfare support soon after his return "just in case." This example shows how partners might imagine the pasts of others, linking these to imagined futures, which affects their practice in the present. Interestingly, concerns around the imagined impact of PTSD on future deployability were described more regularly by army partners than imagined challenges

that PTSD might have upon their family, perhaps suggesting their prioritization of military requirements.

Participants also described increases in military kit around the house after their serving partner's return. Some described irritation caused by their boots taking up space next to the front door, tripping over them, making the space look untidy, and the amount of washing and organization required in preparation for future use. This shows how military and civilian spatial demarcation is blurred as kit moves through these spaces and is acted upon, maintaining readiness.

These examples show how army partners can be haunted by possibilities of future deployments, impacting their present. They negotiate a liminal state between past and future times. Although their serving partner has returned, they do not necessarily move into the state of being "wholly with," instead of continuing to anticipate a future "without." So, full reintegration does not appear to happen per the emotional cycle of deployment. Furthermore, they are absorbed into a liminal civilian/military space as while they are not employed by the military, their labor, orientated around maintaining readiness, is militarized.

Ambiguity Between Deployment Stages

It is not just between previous and future deployments that the data demonstrate army partners' negotiations with liminality. They also experience liminality between deployment stages: (1) predeployment–deployment, (2) deployment–postdeployment, (3) predeployment–postdeployment, and (4) postdeployment–deployment. This section explores these complex connections between past and future deployment stages, showing how partners' experiences of time further disrupt the chronological flow of the emotional cycle of deployment.

During the predeployment stage, army partners live the deployment stage. They prepare for the eventual absence of their serving partner by bolstering coping strategies and assuming more control over the household to limit the impact of separation. In this sense, they are in a liminal state as they anticipate, prepare for, and imagine separation from their serving partner, readying their upcoming labor. For example, they ensured that bills were in their name, considered the balance between employment and childcare, prepared children for what to expect, attended briefings organized by military support, and attempted to plan communication strategies. These examples show that through their labor, army partners live in-between the present (predeployment) and imagined future deployment stage (deployment).

During the deployment stage, partners also live the postdeployment stage. They take on almost total domestic and childcare responsibilities during deployment, yet they facilitate and maintain "space" for their serving partner, aware of the need to keep communication avenues open to ease experiences for all family members postdeployment when reintegrating. Many manage and facilitate communication between their serving partner and children, attempting to keep him present in their children's lives and mitigate effects of his absence due to missing key times passed

growing up. Partners adopted strategies including the sharing of photographs, using webcam-based technologies, and height charts. For example, Lydia said that, as her daughter became older, she started to understand that her father was not present and missed him. In response to this, she helped her daughter to write letters and said that “I like to try and video things that are happening and send them via email or WhatsApp.” Examples like this show how partners adapt their practices around deployments according to other nonmilitary transitions (e.g., children growing up and changing communication technologies). These practices smooth disruption to the family unit, helping children recognize their parent and keeping the serving partner present in their upbringing. Through this, army partners do not truly reach the social state of “being without,” rather they experience and manage the ambiguous presence (Faber et al., 2008) of their serving partner, living in-between the present (deployment) and imagined future deployment stage (postdeployment).

Some of the partners said that even though they had maintained communication between children and the absent parent during deployment, it did not always lead to their imagined seamless reintegration postdeployment. Isobel said that on her partner’s return, “The younger one [. . .] didn’t know who he was. Even though we’d spoken on Skype, she talked about it and she’d sent him messages and stuff, she didn’t recognize him at all.” Others talked about children “acting up” as they reacted against a new authority figure. This shows that practices adopted during deployment aiming to smooth the transition in anticipation for reunion by mitigating the effects of time do not always produce intended outcomes.

The deployment stage itself also indicates a time that could be considered liminal, as some participants talk about “getting through it,” skipping from predeployment to postdeployment. As described earlier, they adopt strategies to make time “go faster” during deployment, showing how they try to manage their experiences of time. Additionally, some partners resisted acknowledging the length of time of separation, for example, Lydia never says, “goodbye,” instead preferring, “see you later.” She explained that the purpose of not saying “goodbye” was to protect the children because “if they see how you cope, it makes it a lot easier for them.” In this sense, some partners live postdeployment during the predeployment stage.

Postdeployment, it seems that many army partners also live the preceding deployment stage. As discussed earlier, postdeployment, their emotional labor can involve watching for possible mental health concerns that may have been triggered during deployment. They watch their serving partner and interpret behavior according to their understanding of his deployment past. Some talked about how their serving partner needed to adapt to homelife where certain military roles, such as commanding people, were not compatible with familial roles. These adjustments could take various amounts of time and evidence how families live with the echoes of deployment within the home: “After deployment he was changed” (Karianne).

It is not just the changes in their serving partner that army partners interpret and manage postdeployment, they are also aware that they and their children have

changed during the absence. Changes described include, as previously mentioned, children becoming older and partners becoming more independent as they incorporated new coping strategies and learned new skills. For example, Claire said, “I know I wouldn’t ever split up with him, but I know I can survive now without my husband.”

Upon the return, army partners and their families seek a “new normal” (Lapp et al., 2010) but they live with the effects of previous times as all family members change due to deployment and serving partners can express echoes of combat. They live with the awareness that reintegration may not be permanent as redeployment or other military-related separation is possible. The interviews have shown that family members go forward with traces of deployments informing future perspectives, decision-making, and practice.

Deployment and Liminal Spatiotemporalities

This article is one of the few qualitative studies conducted within a UK context exploring army partners’ experiences and labor around deployments, particularly focusing on those not based overseas. It adopted a life-history approach to capture reflections across more than one deployment, moving away from focus on singular deployments, making space for complexity and inclusion of wider detail around previous experiences; multiple separations caused by but not limited to deployments, and children growing up. It has theoretical implications, arguing that studies which focus on singular or cyclical natures of deployment, although useful, cannot capture complexity and incorrectly frames moving through the cycle as chronological. Furthermore, through taking seriously partners’ lived experiences and perspectives, and not organizing interview data into preset categories (e.g., predeployment, during deployment, and postdeployment) defined by militarized event-based times, it considers how time can be experienced differently on the home front.

This article demonstrated how time is not necessarily experienced by partners in the emotional cycle of deployment’s chronological, ordered manner in which there is a beginning, middle, and end. Instead, they relate practice/meaning through perspectives of pasts and imagined futures (Adam, 2010). By foregrounding liminal time in its analysis, this article shows that they live with the specter of deployment where they sit between liminal states of “what was,” “what is,” and “what if” as they move through and between deployments and deployment stages. They wait for normality, but this is limited by real and anticipated future military demands. For many, their labor around deployments evolves as they adapt to managing the presence/absence of their serving partner. For example, during reintegration partners do not necessarily move on from previous stages; instead, banking memories and coping strategies to be utilized again, continuously adapted, and readied for the next deployment. Future research should seek to understand if/how their labor is

reorientated when no longer managing the specter of deployment during and after their serving partner's transition out of the military.

This research develops understandings of how partners manage the challenges of the absence/presence of their serving partner due to deployments and other separations. It shows that while they live with the specter of deployment, in a state of readiness for future disruption to family life, they develop strategies to cope. These strategies are advanced through lessons learned and changes made based upon previous experiences of deployment and through speaking to and receiving advice from other members of the military community. Perhaps this shows how some aspects of their liminal experiences in terms of time, space, and identities/roles caused by the fluctuating presence/absence of their serving partner become more familiar rather than totally unknown. This also has implications for current welfare provision, as some commented that briefings organized by the military to advise them of upcoming deployments were limited in their effectiveness and that they did not relate to the speaker who was often a serving person. Anna said that the briefings would be more useful if partners could hear from a "seasoned" wife with multiple deployments under her belt who could tell her story and advise others.

Furthermore, this article contributes to previous research which has explored how the military relies upon partners' labor in order to deploy as they adopt primary childcare responsibilities, domestic labor, and supporting their serving partner to reintegrate postdeployment (e.g., Gray, 2017; Harrison & Laliberté, 1993; Hyde, 2016; Norris, 2001). Through highlighting army partners' experiences of *doing* deployments, this article considers how they adapt practice to better manage and cope with challenges. These adaptations and evolving practices may be suggestive of gendered ideals where one's labor is held accountable to militarized values oriented toward maintaining operational effectiveness (Enloe, 2000; Gray, 2016, 2017). This research develops the concept of liminality and how adaptation practices continuously evolve in pursuit of becoming the "ideal" while anticipating future unknowns. Their roles are structured in relation to military needs as they are absorbed into militarizing their practice to mitigate the negative effects of their serving partner's absence from the home, while ensuring future deploy-ability. They enact military subjectivity through doing rather than being and their practice is affected by enduring the specter of deployment which persists, contrary to the emotional cycle of deployment, beyond deployment itself and textures wider aspects of their military-associated lives. Future research should continue to take seriously the penetration of the macro- (e.g., gendered militarism) into microlevel practices of partners' everyday lived experiences.

Thomassen (2016, p. 2) states that "the liminal presents itself with a challenge; how to cope with this uncertainty?" Indeed, while this article has demonstrated the various ways in which army partners experience liminal spatiotemporalities around deployments, their roles continue to be partly structured by militarized expectations. Many partners expressed pride in their military identity, and perhaps aligning themselves with militarized purposes and resulting role expectations provided them with a sense of stability amid change and unknown futures.

This article also contributes to Hyde's (2016) research which considered the spatial-temporal register of militarization, specifically the blurring of the often-demarcated civilian/military, home front/combat zone dualisms which the emotional cycle of deployment indirectly frames as separate. This article explored how these spatial dualisms blur as partners facilitate communication between themselves, their children, and their absent serving partner during deployment; military items move between deployment zones and the home front; and they imagine their serving partner's experiences of deployment. Therefore, their experiences of deployment are affected by the liminal space between home front/deployment zones, and future research should continue to explore this blurring and partners' negotiations.

The theoretical implication here is that time is not necessarily experienced by partners in this chronological, ordered manner in which there is a beginning, middle, and an end, nor is deployment experienced in the emotional cycle of deployment's spatial framing around the deployment zones and home front. Instead, they experience liminality in terms of time, space, and identities/roles within these times and spaces. Thus, this article makes the case that future research should continue to look for opportunities to explore partners' experiences of liminality, moving beyond dominant orderings, making space for complexity. Particularly, future research should consider how liminality might affect their resistance to military norms and expectations, as liminal time is reflexive time. It would also be worthwhile considering how liminality might affect mental health, well-being, relationship satisfaction, and employment. It would also be useful to consider the experiences of other members of the military community, particularly male partners, whose exposure to gendered norms may impact experiences differently.

Arguments raised in this article have implications for welfare provision. In the UK, much support is available for families, particularly coordinated during the actual deployment, and many of the participants said that this depleted upon their serving partner's return: suggesting an assumption by support services that "things go back to normal." However, this research shows that the impacts of deployment echo through military families as they live with the specter of deployment, anticipating future deployments/absence and look for effects of previous deployments in both themselves, their serving partner, and their family system. Those providing military families with formal support should be aware that although the stages presented by the emotional cycle of deployment are "real" and provision of this information might be useful in supporting them through deployments, time is experienced in more complex ways on the home front. While the model is shared with partners to build awareness of what they might expect, this information could be enhanced by presenting some of the complexities of moving through and between deployments and deployment stages.

Also, this research suggests that opportunities to support families managing unknown futures, while maintaining a state of readiness, should be pursued (e.g., the effects of liminality/readiness on partners' well-being). This is timely as the British Army expects to deploy much more regularly, for longer periods, and at

shorter notice by 2025 causing families to experience more repeated and regular absences due to deployment, training, and other military requirements (MOD, 2015).

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Notes

1. This article has developed from the ideas and data from the author's PhD research; elements of this are published in their doctoral thesis (Long, 2019a).
2. Much military-organized provision is oriented toward married partners, but this is shifting.
3. This quote has been published previously by the author (Long, 2019b).

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