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# The Relationship Changes of Military Couples During Reintegration

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How would you describe the period of reunion after deployment?



# Today's Presenter

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# Learning Objectives

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- Identify the major domains of relationship changes military couples experience during the post–deployment period.
- Understand the valence of the relationship changes military couples experience during reintegration (positive, negative, and neutral).
- Describe the trajectories of positive, negative, and neutral relationship changes military couples experience over time during the post–deployment period.
- Evaluate recommendations for prevention and intervention services designed to help military couples negotiate relationship changes across the post–deployment transition.

# **The Relationship Changes of Military Couples During Reintegration**

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# **REUNION FOLLOWING DEPLOYMENT:**

**A period of**

**OPPORTUNITY**

**and**

**CHALLENGE**

**for military couples**

# TRANSITIONS

- Transitions generate questions about the nature, status, and future of a relationship (Knobloch & Theiss, 2012)

*“After my husband returned from deployment, there was some difficulty in adjusting to living with each other again ... the few months after his return were the most trying time in our relationship.”*

— at-home National Guard wife, 28 years old

*“She kinda still acts in charge of the house as if I was still gone.”*

— deployed National Guard husband, 48 years old

# BACKGROUND

- **Reunion after deployment** is an important transition for military couples (Bommarito et al., 2017; Meadows et al., 2016)
- **Returning service members** need time to acclimate from deployment to domestic life, and **at-home partners** need time to adjust from independence to interdependence (Freytes et al., 2017; Karakurt et al., 2013; Sahlstein et al., 2009)
- **Military couples** are at risk for **relationship distress** during the post-deployment period (Nelson Goff, Crow, Reisbig, & Hamilton, 2007; Renshaw, Rodrigues, & Jones, 2008)
- **Research** is needed to inform **prevention and intervention services** for military couples following reunion (Sayers, 2011)

# THE EMOTIONAL CYCLE OF DEPLOYMENT MODEL

- **The emotional cycle of deployment model (Pincus et al., 2001) segments the deployment cycle into 5 stages:**
  - **Pre–deployment**
  - **Deployment**
  - **Sustainment**
  - **Redeployment**
  - **Post–deployment**
- **The model suggests that military couples face different challenges at each stage**

# THE EMOTIONAL CYCLE OF DEPLOYMENT MODEL

- The emotional cycle of deployment model identifies specific challenges during the post-deployment phase:
  - Homecoming begins with an early honeymoon period that gradually erodes as the challenges of daily life resume
  - Tensions emerge as returning service members reassert their role in the family, and at-home partners adjust to less autonomy
  - The couple must develop a new household routine
  - The couple must navigate sexual intimacy after time apart

# KEY QUESTIONS

- The emotional cycle of deployment model offers insight into the post–deployment period, but key questions remain:
  1. Do military couples experience other types of relationship changes that are not identified by the model?
  2. Are the relationship changes experienced by military couples primarily positive, negative, or neutral in valence?
  3. What are the trajectories of relationship changes military couples experience during reintegration?

# STUDY GOALS

1. Describe the relationship changes experienced by military couples in a comprehensive way
2. Attend to the experiences of both returning service members and at-home partners
3. Map how relationship changes unfold longitudinally
4. Assess the valence of changes over time
5. Provide recommendations for effective prevention and intervention services

# RESEARCH DESIGN

- **Dyadic longitudinal study of military couples**
- **Military couples completed an online questionnaire at reunion, and again once per month for 7 consecutive months**
- **Participant eligibility:**
  - **Military couples involved in a romantic relationship**
  - **Both partners completed the Wave 1 questionnaire within 7 days of homecoming following deployment**
  - **All branches, components, deployment types included**

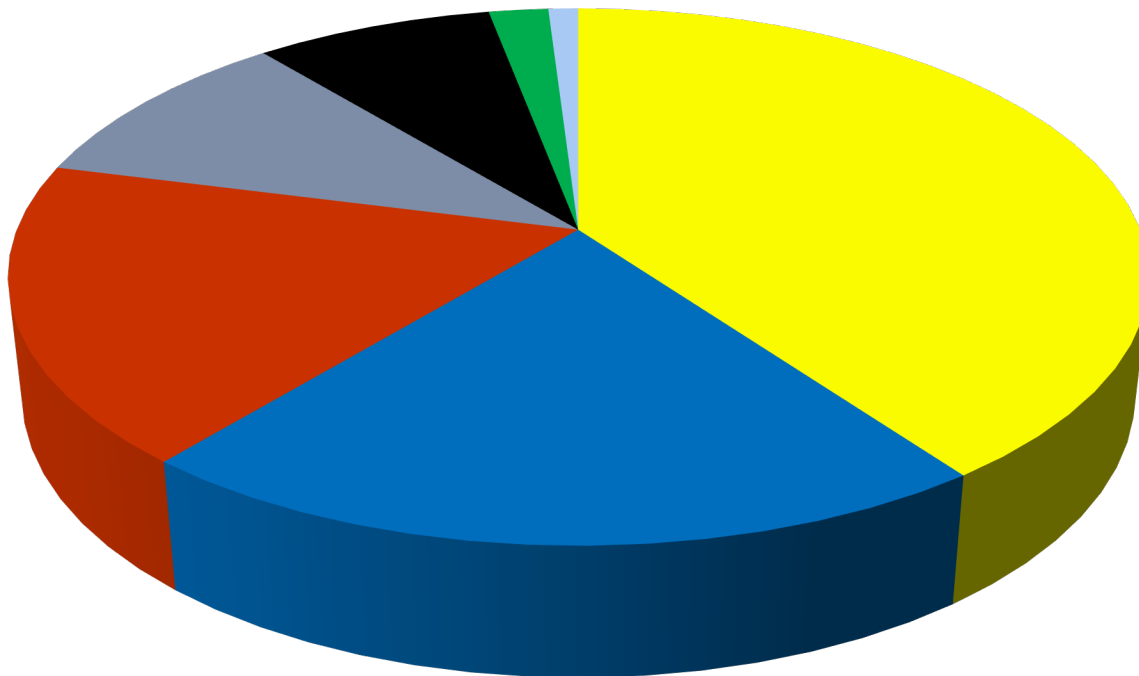


# RECRUITMENT

- **Recruitment utilized a grassroots approach targeting the at-home partner:**
  - **Military family life personnel**
  - **Social media**
  - **Installation newspapers**
  - **Partnerships with nonprofit organizations**

# PARTICIPANTS

- 555 couples ( $N = 1,110$  individuals)
- 554 mixed-sex couples; 1 same-sex couple
- First deployment = 30%
- Combat mission = 60%

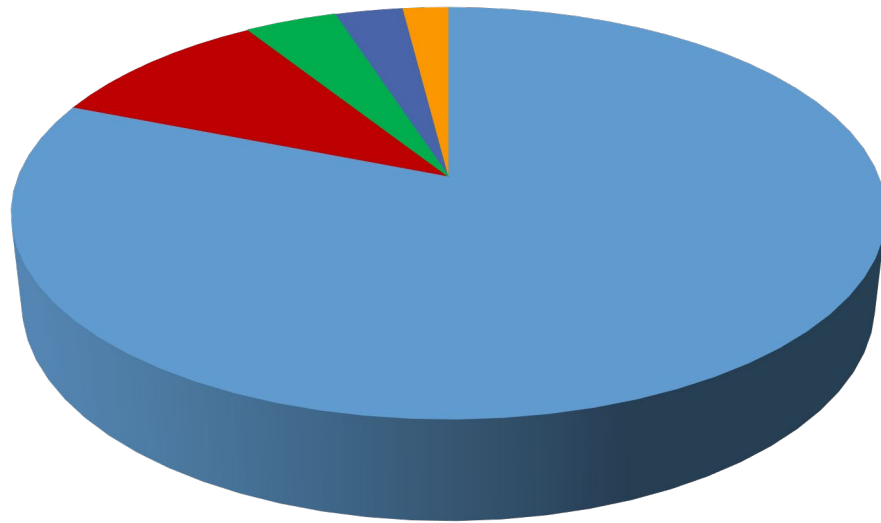


## Branch Affiliation

- Army (40%)
- Navy (21%)
- Marines (18%)
- Air Force (10%)
- Army NG (8%)
- Air NG (2%)
- Coast Guard (1%)

# DEMOGRAPHICS

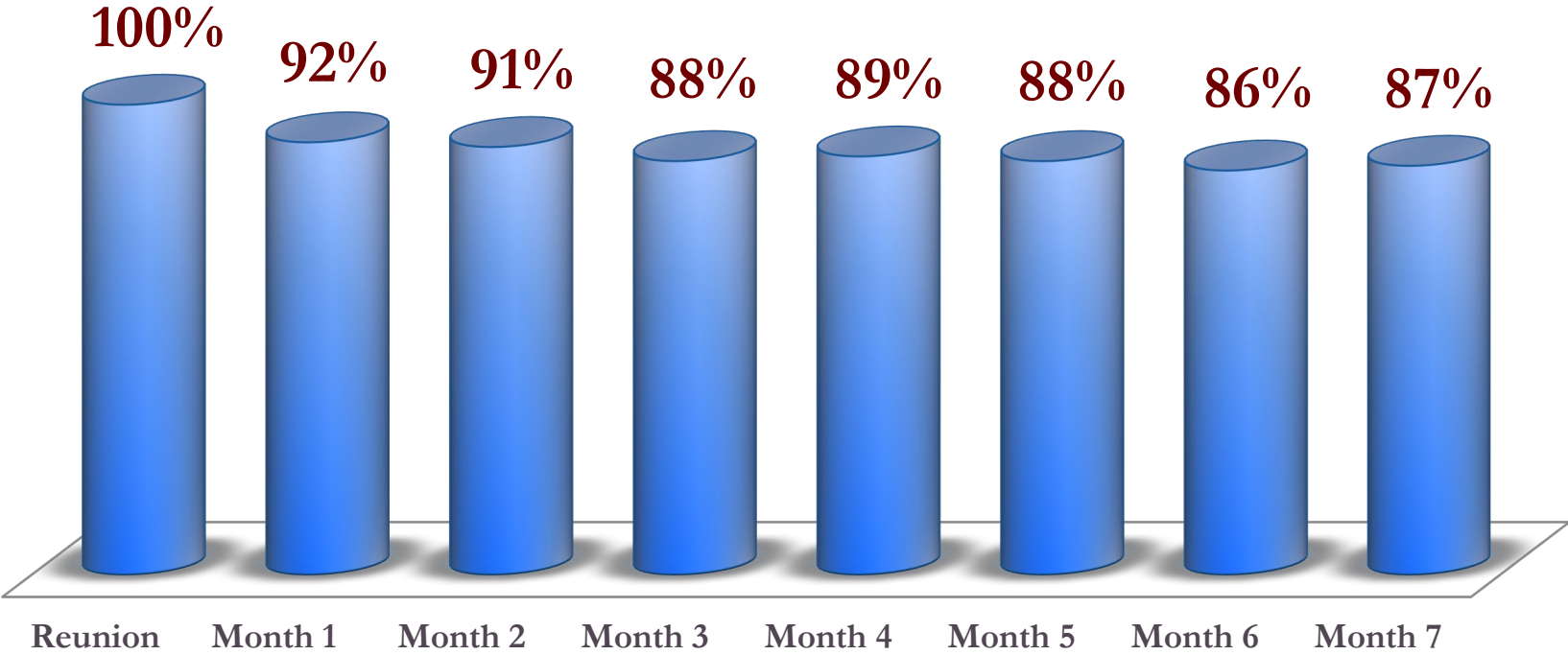
- Geographic residence = 44 U.S. states, D.C., and Guam
- Age range = 19 – 59 years old
- Married = 95%
- Parents = 71%



## Race / Ethnicity

- White (81%)
- Latinx (10%)
- Black (4%)
- Asian or Pacific Islander (3%)
- American Indian or Alaskan Native (2%)

# RETENTION



# DATA COLLECTION

- Each month after reunion, the online questionnaire began with an open-ended question:

*“Has your romantic relationship changed in the past month? If so, list up to three ways your romantic relationship has changed.”*

- We unitized responses into thematic units containing one idea
- Service members and at-home partners wrote a total of 7,387 thematic units across 7 months of data collection ( $M = 7.56$ ,  $SD = 5.54$ , range 1 – 41)

# DATA ANALYSIS

- We used **content analysis** (Neuendorf, 2002) to derive categories from the responses
- We created a **codebook** that described the categories, and provided **examples of positive, negative, and neutral changes** within each category
- We trained **8 independent coders** to classify each thematic unit by **category and valence**
- **Coding reliability** was calculated using **Krippendorff's  $\alpha$**  (Krippendorff, 2004):  
  
 **$\alpha = 0.85$**  for category coding and  **$\alpha = 0.82$**  for valence coding

# RESULTS

- We identified **10 categories** of relationship changes:
  - Emotional intimacy, closeness, and support
  - Sexual intimacy and romance
  - Spending time together
  - Appraisals of the relationship
  - Life changes
  - Readjustment to daily life
  - Conflict
  - Family changes
  - Commitment to the relationship
  - No changes

# EMOTIONAL INTIMACY ( $N = 1,550$ )

*“We’re telling each other that we love each other more.”*

— at-home partner in Month 1, positive valence

*“It feels more distant.”*

— military service member in Month 1, negative valence

*“Feels like in some ways we have gotten closer,  
but in some ways we have grown apart.”*

— at-home partner in Month 2, neutral valence



# SEXUAL INTIMACY ( $N = 1,137$ )

*“More intimate sex.”*

— at-home partner in Month 7, positive valence

*“Lost passion.”*

— military service member in Month 1, negative valence

*“I felt that he was less affectionate towards me,  
but that has been improving.”*

— at-home partner in Month 1, neutral valence

# SPENDING TIME TOGETHER ( $N = 732$ )

*“We don’t want to leave each other’s side.”*

— at-home partner in Month 1, positive valence

*“Less time together.”*

— military service member in Month 4, negative valence

# APPRAISALS OF THE RELATIONSHIP ( $N = 677$ )

*“I think we’re stronger than ever.”*

— at-home partner in Month 4, positive valence

*“There is not a lot of effort being put into it by either of us.”*

— at-home partner in Month 2, negative valence

*“It has many ups and downs. Really high highs and really low lows.”*

— at-home partner in Month 5, neutral valence

# LIFE CHANGES

## ( $N = 621$ )

*“We have begun to do devotions at night, and afterward pray.”*

— returning service member in Month 3, positive valence

*“More financial stress.”*

— at-home partner in Month 4, negative valence

*“Started a second job.”*

— at-home partner in Month 6, neutral valence

# READJUSTMENT TO DAILY LIFE ( $N = 586$ )

*“We feel more adjusted with each other. Developed a routine.”*

— at-home partner in Month 1, positive valence

*“The honeymoon phase of being back is gone.”*

— returning service member in Month 3, negative valence

*“We have drifted back into pre-deployment mode.”*

— at-home partner in Month 6, neutral valence

# CONFLICT

## ( $N = 452$ )

*“It is easier to agree on things.”*

— returning service member in Month 1, positive valence

*“We fight more than we ever have before.”*

— at-home partner in Month 2, negative valence

*“Normal amount of arguments, nothing major.”*

— at-home partner in Month 5, neutral valence

# FAMILY CHANGES

## ( $N = 359$ )

*“Getting closer as a family.”*

— returning service member in Month 2, positive valence

*“Our daughter’s behavior problems have put a strain on our relationship.”*

— at-home partner in Month 7, negative valence

*“Back to reality of parenting together.”*

— at-home partner in Month 2, neutral valence

# COMMITMENT TO THE RELATIONSHIP ( $N = 156$ )

*“Husband asked to renew our wedding vows.”*

— at-home partner in Month 7, positive valence

*“I think my wife is cheating.”*

— returning service member in Month 4, negative valence

*“We have recently opened up our marriage.”*

— returning service member in Month 7, neutral valence



# **NO CHANGE**

## **( $N = 1,104$ )**

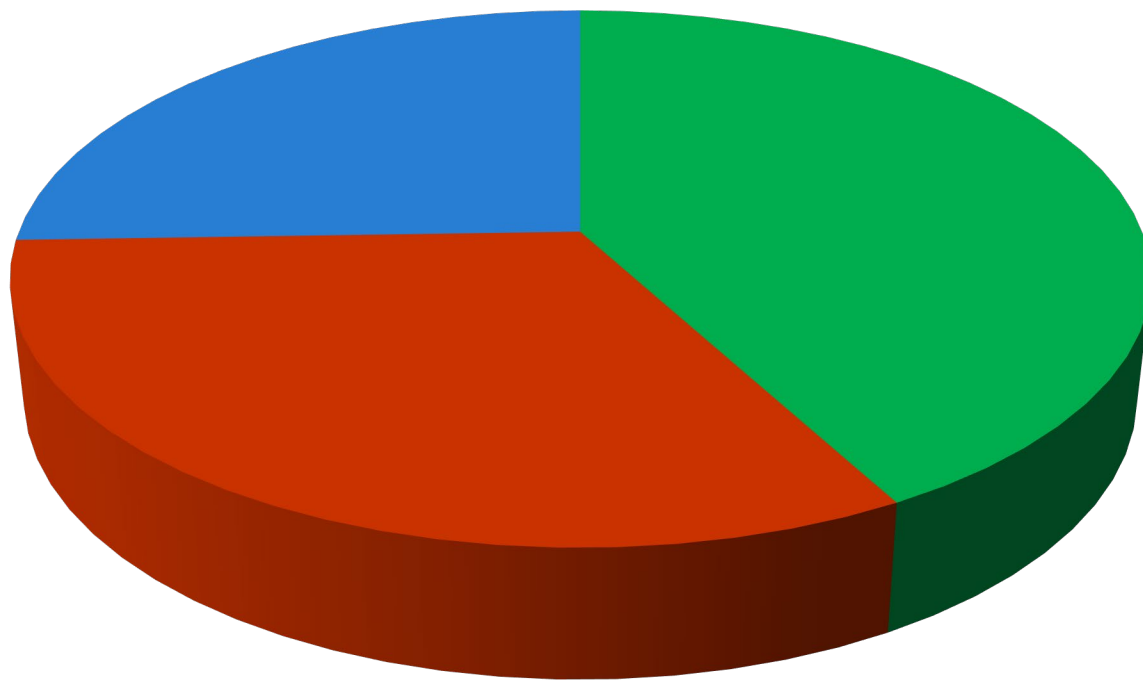
*“It’s been about the same.”*

— returning service member in Month 3, neutral valence

*“It hasn’t changed much.”*

— at-home partner in Month 1, neutral valence

# VALENCE OF RELATIONSHIP CHANGES



## Valence

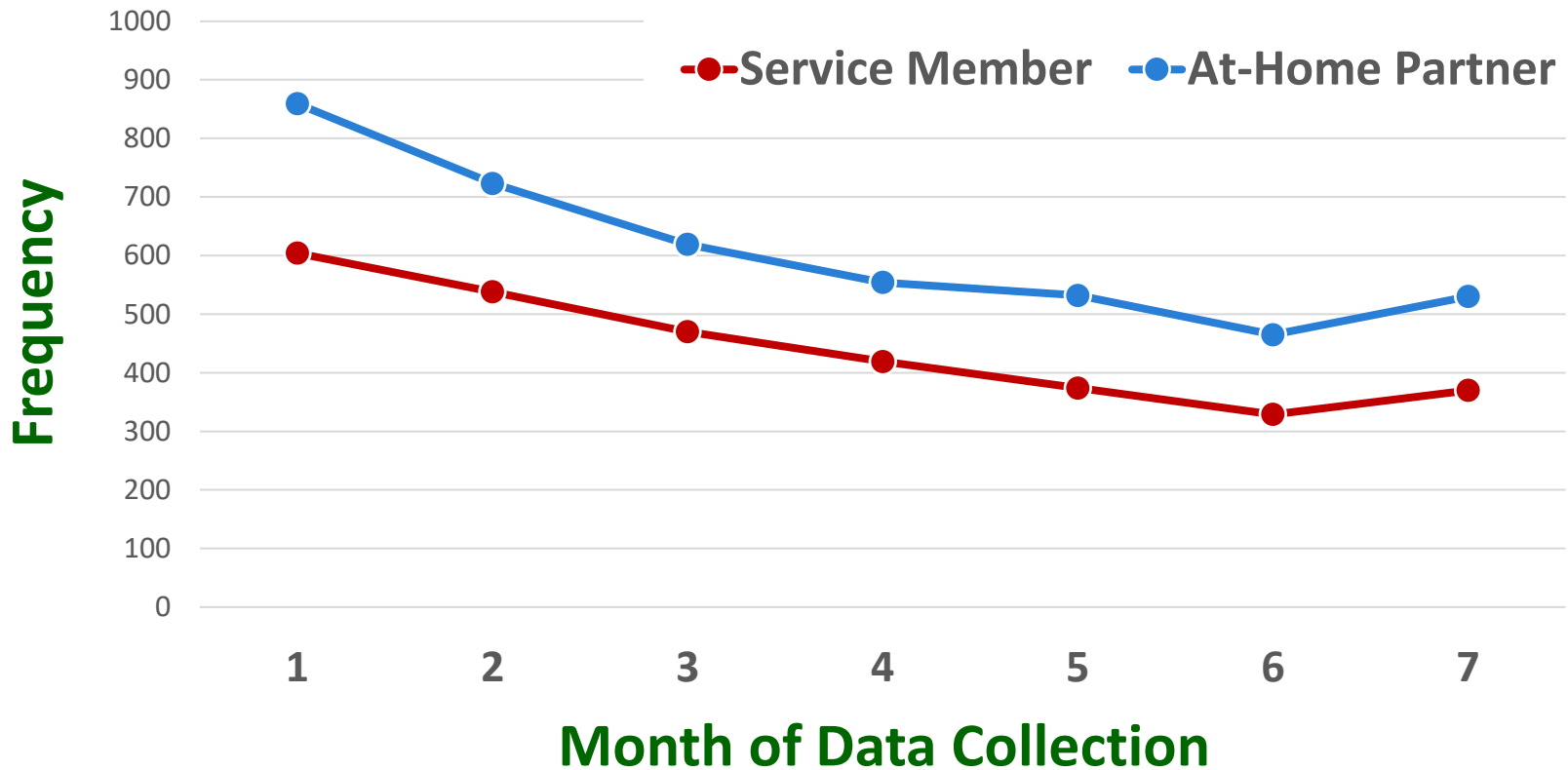
■ Positive (42.1%)

■ Negative (32.4%)

■ Neutral (25.5%)

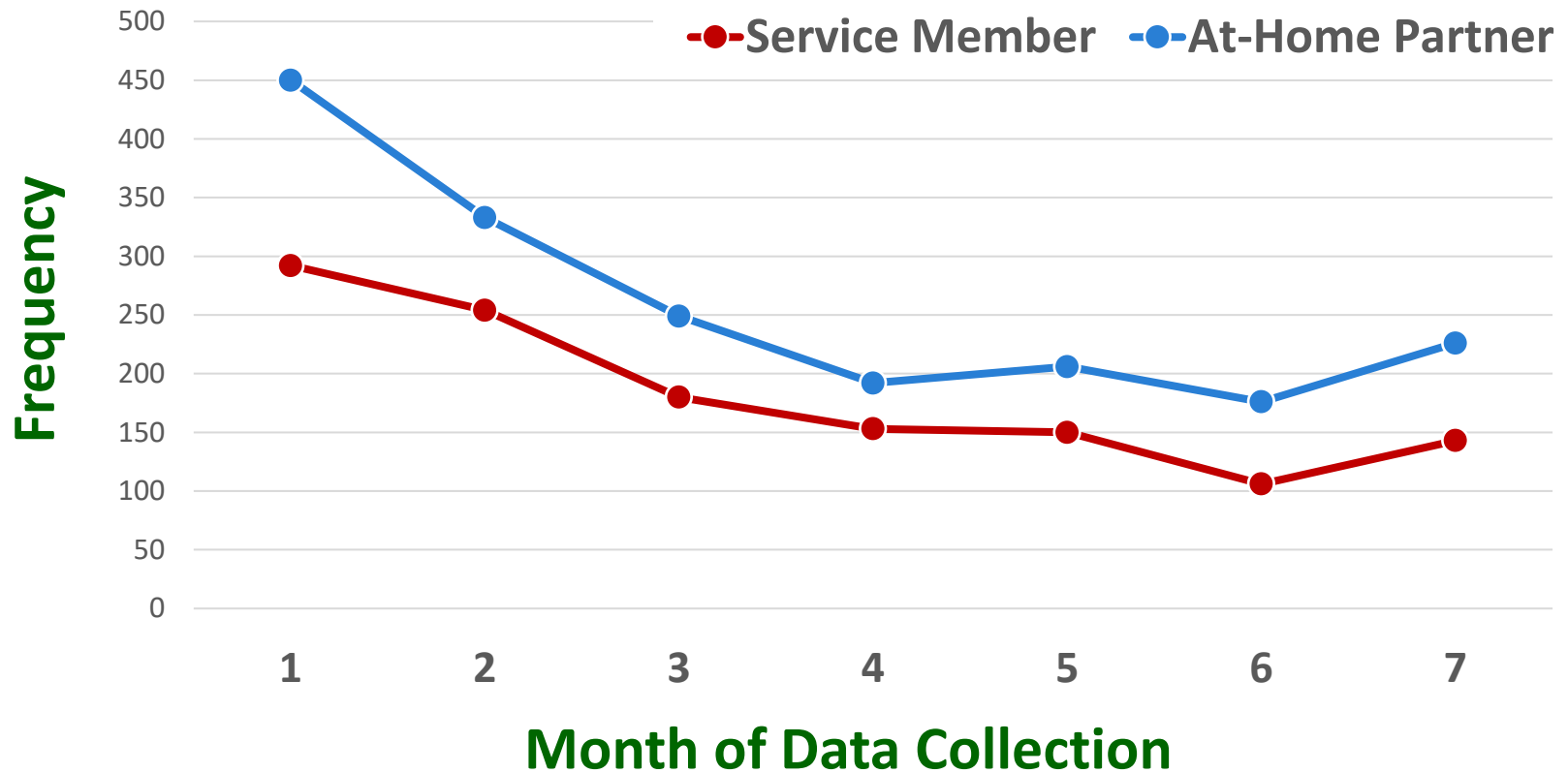
# RELATIONSHIP CHANGES ACROSS TIME

## Frequency of All Changes



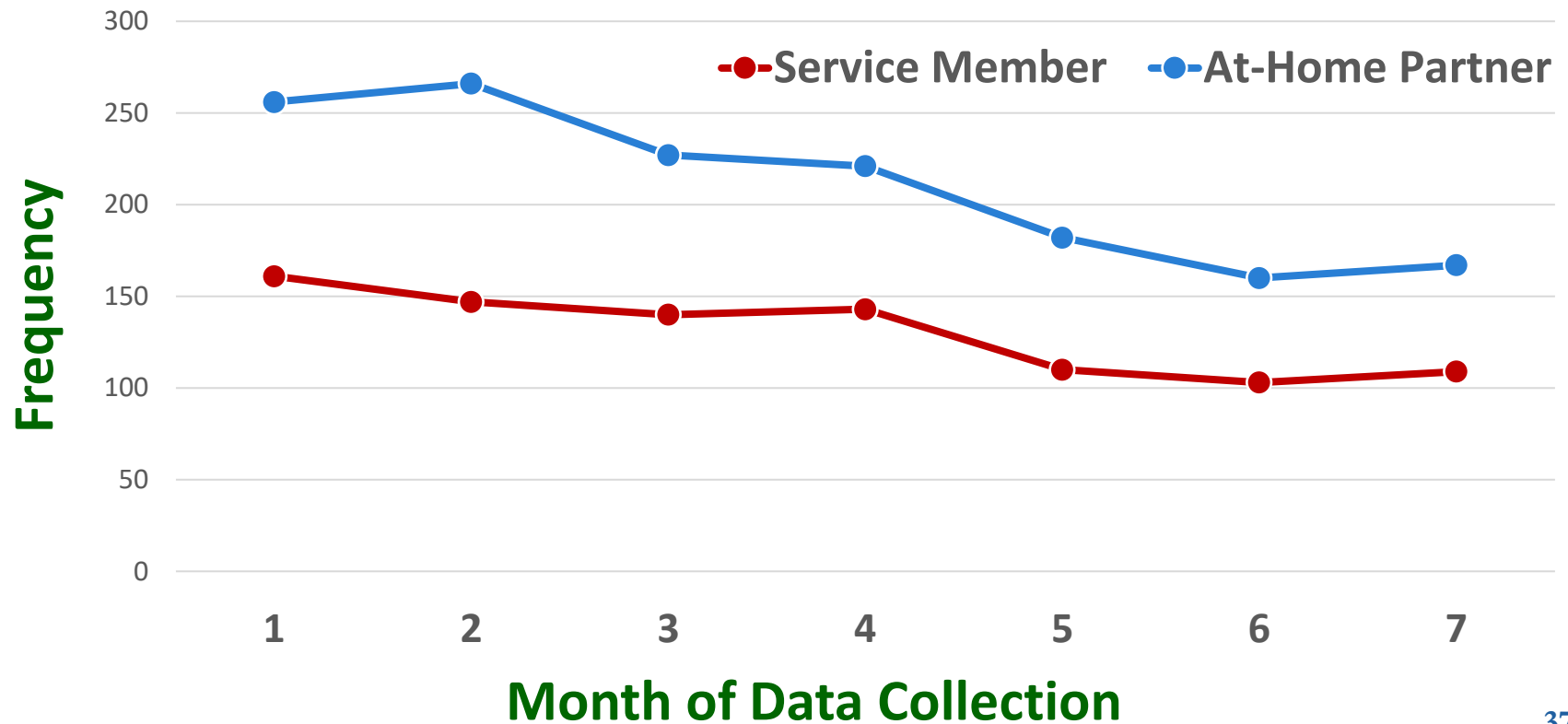
# RELATIONSHIP CHANGES ACROSS TIME

## Frequency of Positive Valence Changes



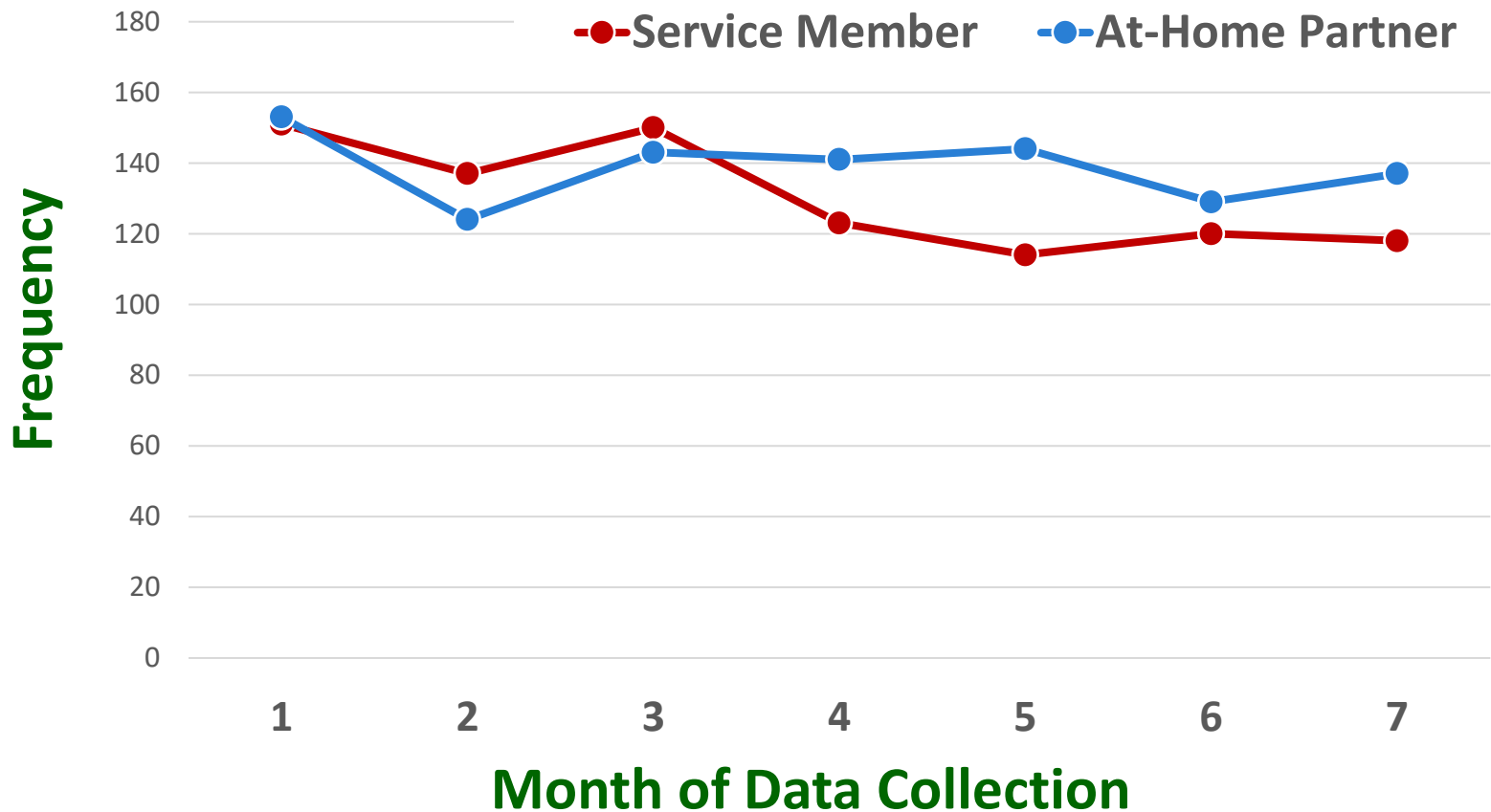
# RELATIONSHIP CHANGES ACROSS TIME

## Frequency of Negative Valence Changes



# RELATIONSHIP CHANGES ACROSS TIME

## Frequency of Neutral Valence Changes



# TRAJECTORIES OF CHANGES WITHIN CATEGORIES

- The longitudinal trajectories of content and valence were similar for returning service members and at-home partners, suggesting comparable sequences over time
- Changes happening “between partners” (intimacy, conflict, and daily routines) appeared to be most prominent earlier in the transition
- Changes happening “to couples” (normative life changes) appeared to be most prominent later in the transition

# IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESULTS

- The **post–deployment transition** is much more **complex** than either pure joy or acute distress (Sahlstein et al., 2009; Sahlstein Parcell & Maguire, 2014):
  - **42.1%** of responses described **positive changes**
  - **32.4%** of responses described **negative changes**
  - **25.5%** of responses described **neutral changes**
- **Positive** relationship changes **declined** across the transition, **but leveled off** over time
- **Negative** relationship changes **remained stable** across the transition
- **Neutral** relationship changes **increased** across the transition



# IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESULTS

- **Our data remind us that military couples experience normative changes alongside reunion–specific shifts**
- **Couples who accumulate family life course changes on top of deployment–related changes might deplete their coping resources more quickly (Collins et al., 2017)**
- **Sequential programming tailored to the progression of the transition over time may be most effective**

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- **Relationship processes are a key target for prevention and intervention efforts during the post–deployment period**
- **Couples may benefit from services that:**
  - **Prepare them for a decline in positive changes over time**
  - **Prepare them for negative changes across the transition**
- **Reintegration support services may be most effective if timed to correspond with the trajectory of the transition:**
  - **Intervention at homecoming**
  - **Follow–up outreach coinciding with patterns of decline in positive changes across the transition**

# LIMITATIONS

- Our results may not be generalizable to the diversity of U.S. military couples
  - Our sample overrepresents White individuals, male returning service members, heterosexual couples, and Army couples
- Our findings rely on self-report methods
  - But, given the detailed and sensitive nature of many responses, our data do not appear to be unduly influenced by social desirability or careless responding
- Our study began at reunion, so we lack information about relationship changes that occurred during deployment itself

# FUTURE DIRECTIONS

- There are several important next steps in this area of research:
  - Studies that follow military couples throughout the entire deployment cycle, with a baseline assessment at pre-deployment and follow-up assessments after homecoming
  - Studies that widen our focus on military couples to include changes experienced by military parents and children

**THANK YOU VERY MUCH  
FOR YOUR ATTENTION!**

**QUESTIONS AND FEEDBACK  
WELCOME!**

Knobloch-Fedders, L. M., Knobloch, L. K., Scott, S., & Fiore, H. (2020).  
Relationship changes of military couples during reintegration: A longitudinal  
analysis. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships, 37* (7), 2415 – 2165.

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