



THE UNIVERSITY
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Helping Military Families Create Systems of Social Support

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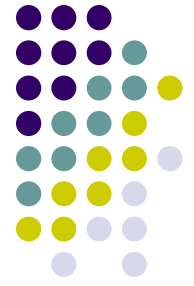
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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Overview



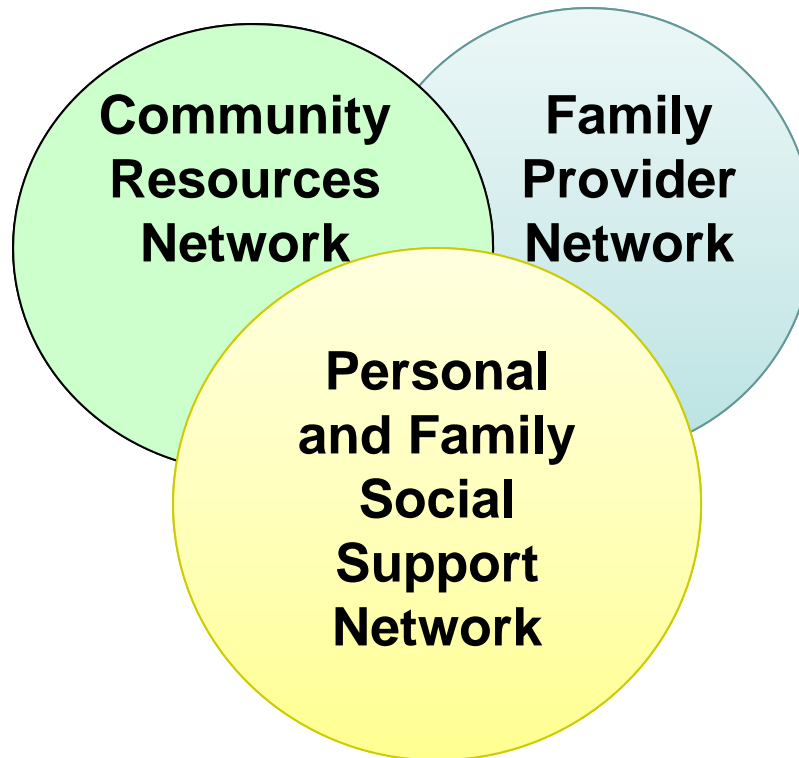
- What is social support?
- Whose responsibility is social support?
- How much social support is out there?
- What does social support do?
- How do we grow social support in our communities?



What is social support?

- Lots of different definitions
- “The individual belief that one is cared for and loved, esteemed and valued, and belongs to a network of of communication and mutual obligations” (Cobb, 1976)
- Components:
 - Socio-Emotional support (caring, concern, trust)
 - Information support (advice, shared experiences)
 - Instrumental support (assistance, helps, money)

Social Support Paradigms

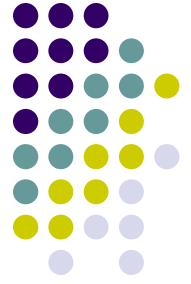


Paradigms of Social Support



- **Individual and Family Perspective**
 - Social network of close relationships
 - Friends, intimates, confidants
 - People who can overcome loneliness or isolation
 - People you can count on for help
 - Assumed reciprocity of social investments

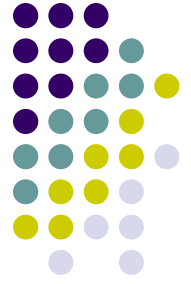
Paradigms of Social Support



- **Community Perspective**

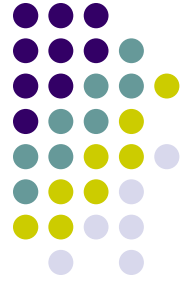
- Well connected community or gemeinschaft
- Social capital mechanism
- Safety for citizens
- Crisis response system
- Marketing network for services

Paradigms of Social Support



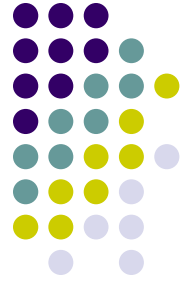
- **Service Provider Perspective**
 - Source of consumers or program users
 - Mechanism for reducing negative events
 - Factor in retention and family support
 - Offset to personnel work demands
 - Organizational utility maximization (cohesion)

How is Social Support Today?



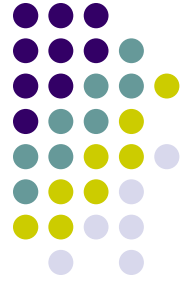
- **How well are military families connected?**
(Army 2006 data)
 - % of spouses with close relationship nearby
 - Enlisted (54%)
 - Officers (63%)
 - Not employed (52%)
 - Less than 12 months in community (48%)
 - % of spouses willing to turn to others with a problem
 - Neighbor (37%)
 - Friend (82%)
 - Family member (90%)

How is Social Support Today?



- **How well are military communities connected?** (Army 2006 data of active-duty spouses)
 - % who see people willing to help each other
 - Enlisted (37%) and Officer spouses (61%)
 - % who believe people depend on others
 - Enlisted (38%) and Officer spouses (65%)
 - % who believe families easily make connections
 - Enlisted (38%) and Officer spouses (59%)
 - % willing to go to a faith community for help
 - Enlisted (48%) and Officer spouses (64%)

How is Social Support Today?

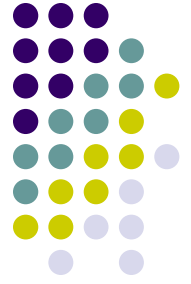


- **Essential Life Skills for Military Families**

(social support and resilience in the military RC)

- 10 item index of social connections
 - Majority of service members reported 4-6 connections
- Focus on interpersonal relationships as foundation for resilience
 - “I learned to build true friendships and its importance to my well-being”
 - “Not all activities have the same benefit. Even though you share time with others, you need to be sure to have quality time”
 - Maintaining my relationship through couple activities [is important] but we also need to get together with other couples too”

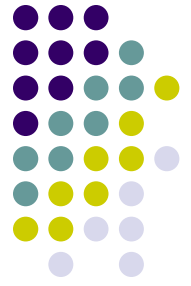
How is Social Support Today?



- **Summary**

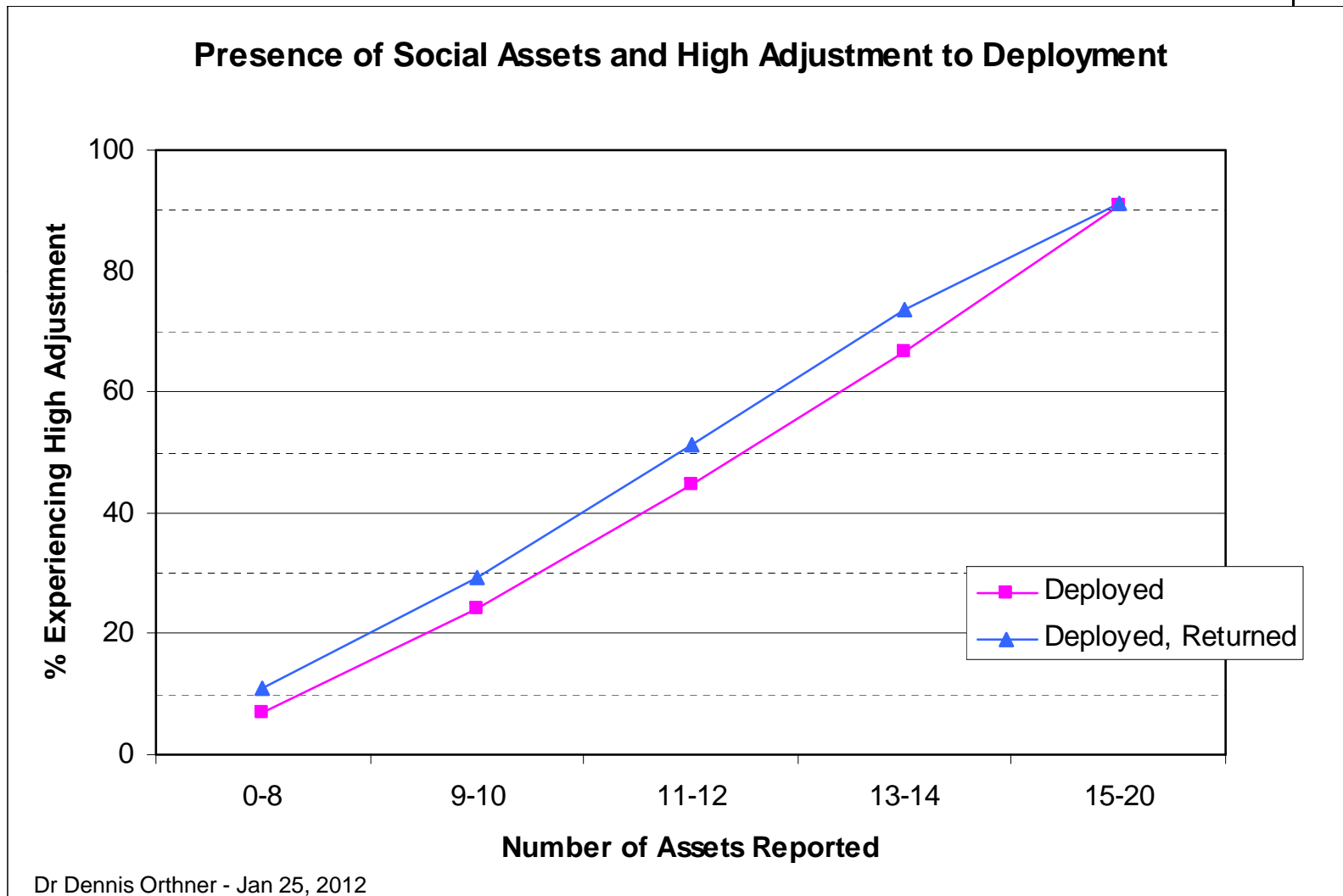
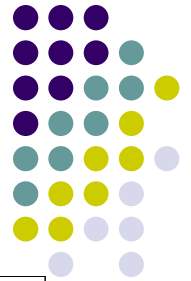
- Findings from Army and Reserves similar
- Data from Gary Bowen's multi-service personal and family index confirms weak social support
- Challenges:
 - Networks decline with age and moves (PCSs)
 - Networks weaker among young enlisted
 - Networks weaker the further from the installation
 - Networks weakest among the most stressed

Outcomes from Social Support



- Research shows:
 - Fewer suicides
 - Stronger marriages
 - Improved mental health
 - Better health outcomes
 - More personal and family resilience to challenges

Consequences of Social Support: Deployment Adjustment



Factors Contributing to Spouse Deployment-Related Adjustment

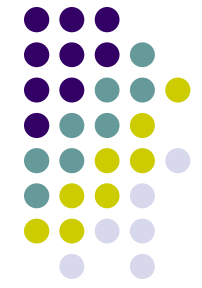
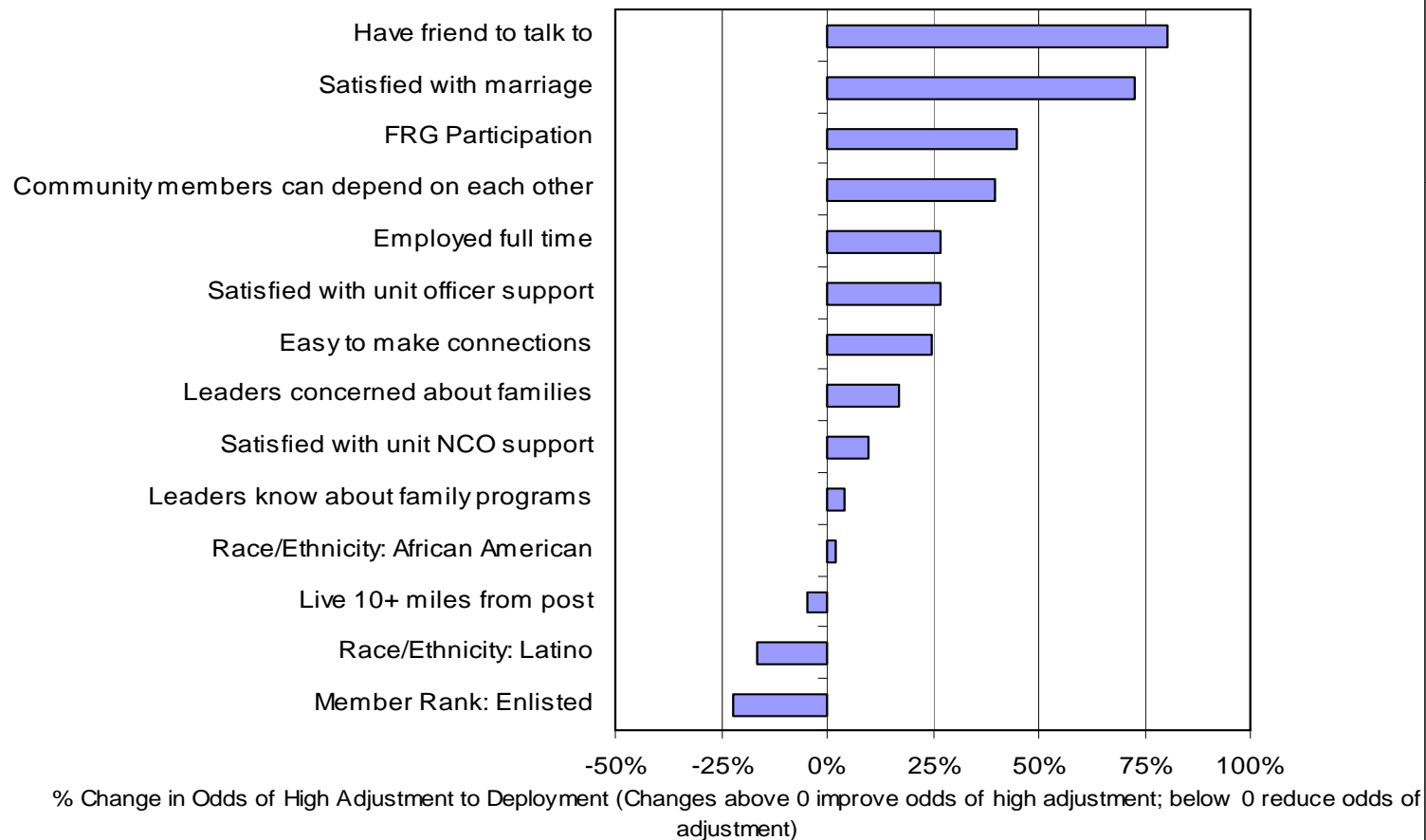


Figure 3: Effect of FRG, Personal Characteristics, Unit & Social Support on Odds of Deployment Adjustment: Regression Analysis Results (among those with an active FRG)



Logistic Regression Analysis:

% change in odds of high adjustment to deployment

Fostering Social Support:

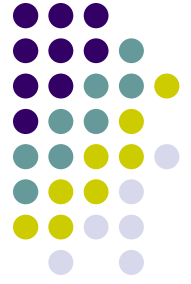
1) Strengthen Existing Networks

- Faith communities of all kinds
 - Clergy training on military life style and demands
- Local community support services
 - Libraries, parks and rec, cooperative extension, etc.
 - Demonstrated willingness to help but need training
- MWR/Services recreation and other programs
 - Highly regarded programs but individual focus
 - Ex: **Corporate Focus** strategy in the Air Force worked!
- Community Housing/Mayoral programs
 - Go beyond community watch and community events to community building
- Family Readiness/Ombudsman Groups
 - FRGs are not just for deployment anymore!



Fostering Social Support:

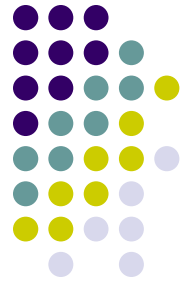
2) Promote New Networks



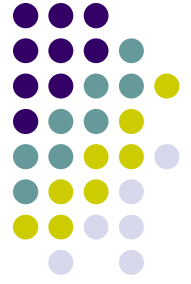
- Affinity groups are a great start
 - People will gather around common interests
 - MOPS, babysitting coops, financial planning, home Bible studies, home schooling (affinity groups)
- Community/neighborhood groups off installation
 - Run classes in lower-rent apartment and mobile home housing areas
 - Get staff out of their offices to where the networks are needed!
- Unit support groups, not just FRG's
 - Build relationship skills into unit training (singles too liked **ELSMF**)
 - Use family days for relationship building, not just sports
 - Ex: **Unit Support Strategy** in the Army strengthened cohesion!

Fostering Social Support:

3) Connect People to Networks



- Helping connect people to available support networks is much more useful than bringing them to your services
 - This is true “**community capacity building**”
 - “Teaching people to fish is better than giving them a fish”
 - Requires relationships and trust with support networks
 - May require new training and skills for providers
- Support services targeted to training, technical assistance, supported services, and priority classes (often for other providers and unit leaders)
 - Less center-based focus and more community focus
 - Community and leader engagement would be the priority
- Connecting others demands knowing others
 - Ongoing assessment of personnel, family and leader needs



Conclusions

- “Creating systems of social support” will require new skills and priorities for AC and RC family support personnel and leaders
- Basic skills in community networks capacity building will be needed by everyone
- A shift in mindset from “*my needs*” to do to “*their needs*” for support is critical
- Continuing with current center-based programs will limit the capacity for social support building