

Reintegration Experiences of Military Nurses Deployed in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars



Elizabeth Scannell-Desch, PhD, RN, OCNS

Rutgers University - Camden

Mary Ellen Doherty, PhD, RN, CNM

Western Connecticut State University

Purpose

To describe common components of the reintegration experience of military nurses who served in Iraq and Afghanistan during the war years, 2003-2013

Institutional Review Board Approval

- **Adelphi University**
- **Western Connecticut State University**

Methodological Assumptions

- **Volunteers who agree to be interviewed will be:**
 - **Able to recall their reintegration experience as a military nurse returning from Iraq or Afghanistan**
 - **Willing to share their reintegration experience as co-participants in this research, and that**
 - **Common human experiences have some like elements for individuals**

Literature Review

- Hopkins-Chadwick, D.L. (2012). Strategies to support nurse work reintegration after deployment: Constructed from an analysis of Army nurses' redeployment experiences. *U.S. Army Medical Department Journal*, 59-63.
- Rivers, F.M., Gordon, S., Speraw, S., & Reese, S. (2013). U.S. Army nurses' reintegration and homecoming experiences. *Military Medicine*, 178, 162-166.

Research Approach & Methodology

- **Phenomenology**
 - **Husserl's perspective**
 - **Describes the lived experience as told by those experiencing it**
 - **Includes the meaning the experience holds for the person**



The Population

Men & women RNs who served in the Army, Navy or Air Force in Iraq or Afghanistan during the war years, 2003-2013



Sample and Study Setting

Sample selection

- Purposive sampling using 'snowball' technique
- **Sample: 35 nurses**

Study Setting

- Face-to-face & telephone interviews



Sample

35 Military Nurses

- Army 11
- Air Force 12
- Navy 12



Sample Area of Assignment

IRAQ

- 7 Army Nurses
- 7 Air Force Nurses
- 8 Navy Nurses

AFGHANISTAN

- 8 Army Nurses
- 9 Air Force Nurses
- 9 Navy Nurses



**** Numbers = 48 because some nurses served 2 or more tours in Iraq or Afghanistan, or tours in both war theaters**

Data Collection:

Two Data-Generating Core Questions

- **How would you describe your experience of reintegration after returning from the Iraq or Afghanistan war?**
- **What else would you like to share with me about your reintegration experience?**

Data Analysis

- Procedures adapted from Colaizzi (1978)



Colaizzi's (1978) Data Analysis Procedure

- Read all interviews to acquire a feeling for them
- Review each interview & extract significant statements
- Formulate/spell out meanings for each statement
- Organize formulated meanings into theme clusters
- Integrate results into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon under study
- Ask participants about the findings as a final validating step

Trustworthiness of Data

- **Rigor** was attained by attending to:
 - **Credibility**
 - **Confirmability**
 - **Dependability**
 - **Transferability**

9 Themes

- 1-Homecoming: A Mixed Reception
- 2-Renegotiating Roles: A Family Affair
- 3-Painful Memories of Wartime Deployment
- 4-Sorting It Out: Getting Help
- 5-Needing a Clinical Change of Scenery
- 6-Petty Complaints & Trivial Whining: No Tolerance Here
- 7-My Military Unit or My Civilian Job: Support vs. Lack of Support
- 8-Family and Social Networks: Support vs. Lack of Support
- 9-Reintegration: Creating a New Normal

Theme 1 - Homecoming: A Mixed Reception



Theme 2 - Renegotiating Roles: A Family Affair



Theme 3 - Painful Memories of Wartime Deployment



Theme 4 - Sorting It Out: Getting Help



Theme 5 - Needing a Clinical Change of Scenery



Theme 6 - Petty Complaints & Trivial Whining: No Tolerance Here



Theme 7 - My Military Unit or My Civilian Job: Support vs. Lack of Support



Theme 8 - Family and Social Networks: Support vs. Lack of Support



Theme 9 -Reintegration: Creating a New Normal



Discussion

- 1st to include RNs from all 3 Nurse Corps
- 1st to include active duty RNs & Reserve RNs
- 2 themes new to any research efforts
 - **Needing a clinical change of scenery**
 - **Petty complaints & trivial whining: No tolerance here**
- Captured the differences in reintegration of active duty vs. reserve components
- Supported findings of Rivers et al. & Hopkins-Chadwick re:
 - **painful memories**
 - **feeling 'changed'**
 - **family & workplace readjustment**
 - **feeling a lack of support or good support from family & employment networks**

Study Conclusions

- Homecoming was more difficult than anticipated.
- Memories of war will be etched in the nurses' minds forever.
- Nurses reported being ill-prepared for the psychological effects of providing care in a war zone.
- Reintegration was described as an open-ended process with some commonalities as well as individual differences.
- The military services can improve upon their homecoming & reintegration support by listening to the voices of returning personnel.

Study Conclusions

- **Deployed nurses see an important role for themselves in preparing other military nurses for wartime deployment.**
- **The military services need to remove the ‘stigma’ of seeking mental health counseling so that returning personnel will be comfortable seeking such help.**
- **Everyone’s reintegration timetable is unique and personal.**

General Conclusions

- This study is an **initial look** at the reintegration experience of nurses deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan.
- This study **extends** the developing body of knowledge about nursing in wartime and also **breaks new ground** in examining the **reintegration experiences** of nurses who deployed in the two current wars.
- Phenomenology as method provided a **fruitful framework** to describe the experience of deployed nurses.

Recommendations

Further studies on various aspects of deployment need to be conducted specifically focusing on:

- **The occurrence of PTSD symptoms in nurses**
- **A comparison of the experiences of nurses who served in Iraq vs. Afghanistan**
- **A comparison study of men vs. women nurses**

Implications for Nursing

- It has been estimated that approximately 70% of returning veterans have some degree of PTSD.
 - It appears that nurses serving longer tours of duty in a war zone are at greater risk for PTSD.
- Nurses in Harm's way are not readily identified in the global news.
 - More needs to be written & studied about the role of nurses in war.

Funding Sources

- **Connecticut State University System**
- **Foundation of NY State Nurses**

Our Other Related Research Studies & Publications

- **Experiences of Nurses in the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars 2003-2009**
 - **Journal of Nursing Scholarship (2010)**
- **Women Nurses Health and Hygiene Experiences During Deployment to the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars**
 - **Journal of Midwifery and Women's Health (2012)**
- **Nurse Parents: Parental Separation During Deployment to Iraq and Afghanistan Wars**
 - **MCN: The American Journal of Maternal-Child Nursing (2013)**

Our Books

