

Episode 114 - Dr. Alexa Smith-Osborne and Dr. Jayshree Jani: 'Cyber-Marriage': Wartime Military Relationships and Partners' Perceptions of the Impact of Telecommunications

[00:00:08] Welcome to end social work. The podcast series of the University of troppo School of Social Work at www.insocialwork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and research where in social work. I'm your host Peter Sobota. Thanks for downloading more than 300000 of our podcasts. We'd love it if you took a minute to tell us what you like or don't like about them and what you'd like to see us do next. If you're an educator and you are using our podcasts and your courses please let us know how. I know some of you are as I've seen them on course syllabi out there. So let us know. We'd be thrilled to hear from you. Hi everyone. You may or may not know that Buffalo has a sizable Irish population. In fact Buffalo is so Irish we have two St. Patrick's Day parades. There is a giant parade attended by thousands held on Delaware Avenue in downtown Buffalo. But on the day before the smaller valley community associations parade is held in Buffalo's old first ward at the valley's parade. You'll find families and neighborhoods and local businesses parading through the streets of this historic and proud community ending at the associations building where the festivities of the day are only just getting started.

[00:01:43] Regardless of the parade you attend you are likely to see every person who lives in South Buffalo remember letters greeting cards and expensive long distance telephone conversations on phones connected by a cord to a wall. Well advances in communications have brought new options convenience and the promise of making life better and easier for all. In this episode our guests Dr. Alexa Smith-Osborne and Jayshree Jani describe the protective effects and risk factors of multiple modes of communications on relationships affected by military deployments. From the perspective of the women engaged in them our guests discuss the phases and military relationships affected by lengthy spatial separations and contrasts this with their study of civilian long distance relationships Dr. Smith-Osborne and Dr. Jani discuss the power structures that may be impacted by technological advances and other surprising results related to frequency immediacy and ease of communication preferred by the women surveyed they conclude with recommendations for social workers who can assist women on the home front make decisions about communication patterns that promote resilience in their relationships Alexa Smith-Osborn Ph.D. is an assistant professor at the University of Texas at Arlington School of Social Work Research team within the center for clinical social work focuses on neuro behavioral factors affecting response to social work interventions interactions of neuro behavioral factors with social networks and other contextual variables on resilient outcomes and effects of assistive and communications technology on supporting cognitive executive functions and intervention response. Doctor's Smith-Osborne and Jani were interviewed by telephone by our own Lisa Butler Ph.D. an associate professor here at the UB School of Social Work. Hello. My name is Dr. Lisa Buttler I'm an associate professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Buffalo and today I'm going to be speaking with Dr. Alexis Smith Osborne of the University of Texas at Arlington.

[00:04:00] And Dr. Jayshree Jani of the University of Maryland Baltimore County welcome and hello. Hello. Hello. Well today we're going to be speaking about a study you conducted entitled cyber marriage phases in wartime military relationships partners perceptions of the impact of telecommunications on interpersonal deployments stressors and resilience. So first off let me ask you what was the central aim of this study. Earlier research on both military families and civilian dual career couples has adjusted that geographical separation was an important variable that could

be associated with emotional distance and even eventual attenuation and termination of the relationship. Since current conflicts have been characterized by increased rates of deployment and also increased length of deployments and deployments extensions and also by injuries affecting behavior and cognition such as post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury. We were interested in adding to the current knowledge base on long distance relationships as it was specifically applied to civilians and to contrast cases in military relationships to examine similarities and differences particularly to compare relationships that may have been affected by changes in telecommunications technology over time. So what was it that prompted your interest in this area of research to start with. Well Dr. Jani and I have worked together for many years with an interest on women's perspectives on relationships and also an interest in technology and the use of communications and other moderators of relationships. Go ahead. Actually I think we both had an interest in sort of postmodern theory. So this study kind of combines feminist and social spatial theories. And that's really what kind of guided the research.

[00:06:05] So taking that look from the women's perspective not just the person who was away but the person kind of holding down the fort and seeing it in this new space the cyber space there's a new place kind of a new societal space for a lack of dominant structures and a kind of a new place to create new power structures. Yes within intimate relationships that are being conducted both face to face and long distance. So that's a larger framework that I wasn't aware of with this. We'll return to that. So you use the phrase cyber marriage phases in wartime military relationships. And I'm interested in what you see those phases of being. Certainly they are on our deployment cycle phases that are particular to these current conflicts that I alluded to before. And so the lived experience of women who are partners of deployed military personnel and also have women who are in intimate relationships with civilians who are separated for reasons other than deployment were of interest in terms of whether there were predictable phases that had differences. The phases for the military of course are somewhat easier to pin down because they related to when they were out of country in a deployment or combat theater and the phases of preparing to leave. Being in the combat theater and then preparing to come back to the United States.

[00:07:42] Also the phases differed by the type of location and military occupational specialty that may limit access to telecommunications so that influences the kind of communication and the frequency of communication that can occur and that we looked at civilian contrast case similar to see if there were phases depending on the cause of the separation whether it was due to career or due to attending different colleges whether the relationship that started online or whether the relationship started face to face and then shifted into a long distance space that was not face to face to see if there were differences there. So according to the findings of your study what were the different perspectives women had on the impact of communication technology on their relationships. So in terms of the findings there were differences that we found of course in our sample that had long distance relationships before the 1980s and after the 1980s because of changes in telecommunications. So the type of communications technology that were used most frequently earlier in history were letters the most frequently cited type of communication were cell and satellite phone calls for the post 1980s. Once those technologies became available. The others that were cited for the earlier relationships were long distance landline phone calls greeting cards audiotapes and mailed gifts. Where as for the current long distance relationships the very different. Others cited were as you might expect text messaging electronic cards e-mails e-mail digital photos instant messaging and webcams supported conversations. So really quite different in many ways because of the availability of technology. And yet as we examine not only frequency but also perception of the impact of the technology. Women in both periods of history suggested that snail mail letters and cards are still special even now and they were perceived differently. Yeah go ahead Jayshree. I think that was very interesting. There was a very distinct difference between maintaining that relationship using frequent contacts like the phone calls or in the 1980s even letters.

[00:10:08] But then the post the text message but then there is a clear distinction between that which maintain the everyday aspect of the relationship but then the more special letters or drying or little packages that made a depth to the relationship and then both cohorts we got a lot of information about those differentiating those two types of communication but that both were really important and maintaining that relationship. That's interesting particularly the former seems so much more evanescent. So you can see it sustaining but just not having the lasting power of the letters the gifts the pictures that kind of stuff. Exactly. And people talked about that exactly that lasting power so being able to. One woman said even with all these e-mails I delete them. And so. But having a letter you re open it and you reread it and you smell it and you touch it so kind of having different senses involved in it. And also this is Alexa Smith-Osborne the perception that the snail mail had been reflection that there was an opportunity to take your time in reflecting on what you were communicating to each other and that there was a depth of self disclosure there and symbolic meanings in terms of the special items like the cards that was not necessarily possible even with regular phone calls or even an e-card or any card. Right. Partly because of just time because in the not so much in the civilian relationships within the military relationships phone calls often had to be extremely brief and so did webcam support communications because of the time differences and the schedules of the military members and the civilian partners. And just technology errors losing the signal that would interrupt conversations. And I think given the spontaneity of it so one person mentioned that phone call even had to be scheduled.

[00:12:12] The whole idea of expecting a communication versus being surprised by it also came up as a theme and those being surprised by something that was considered sort of adding to the intimacy. You use the term relationship resilience and interpersonal deployment stressors as outcomes that might be affected by these different forms of communication. So I'm wondering if you could just give us an idea of what you mean by each of those terms and whether there was this differential effect on these aspects. Well part of the constructive relationship resilience has to do with the power dynamics and cultural assumptions that may be affected by distance in the relationship physical distance and perhaps moderated by the communication. So one of our hypotheses had to do with within spatial relation and feminist theory that the creation of cyberspace as an intimate space had the possibility of introducing more egalitarian power structures within the relationship and that possibly the distance itself gave space particularly for the female to negotiate her life structures in a different way. So I'm just trying to translate into terms that I use regarding resilience. So would the relationship longevity or salinity be enhanced by in a resilient way through that. Yes hypothetically to the extent that cyberspace as a new intimate space that doesn't have the rules the unspoken rules and norms enforced by patriarchal structures within our society could be open to free or less determined or pre-determined power structures that then could offer more resilience in the relationship could be a protective mechanism in ensuring the intimacy and the longevity of the relationship.

[00:14:11] And we did find data to support that notion among particularly the military spouses military women who reflected that being physically apart and having more control over the planning of the communications particularly when it was by webcam supported communications and phone calls really pushed them to develop more interest skills and relationships outside of the marriage that they might not otherwise have done. It also could serve the opposite way where some people especially in the non-military think post 9 right. Yeah. Eighties cohort talked about how the long distance relationships actually stop them from including themselves in their own physical social space. So they sort of relied on the long distance relationship for all of their interactions so they didn't become involved say in groups going on in their university or in their community because they were doing more things online and they were involved socially online in their relationship rather than in their physical space. Right so since their partner wasn't physically available to go to parties social outings and so forth with them some of these civilian college and career related separation relationships wound up becoming more isolated because they had to be

available at the beck and call of the absent male partner when the absent male partner was available to communicate. But it was online or by phone and often this was the source of conflict that if they weren't available there was jealousy and suspicion. Now this also occurred in some of the military relationships and that is a risk with the expectation that we now have a constant quick telecommunications. I'm interested in whether you developed any sort of recommendation based on these findings. Well yes. One had to do with realistic expectations about the nature of long distance telecommunications.

[00:16:22] Now we found with our pre 1980s cohort that both the civilians and even more so the women who were in relationships with military personnel didn't have the expectation of frequent communication they just knew that they'd be lucky to get a letter every now and then. And they accepted it and were fairly stoical about it did not appear distressed but the women's perceptions in the current era both civilian and military appeared to have greater stress were certainly risk of greater stress because they really weren't prepared for the telecommunications frequency and length and quality to be different than it had ever been. And once their male partner was at a distance they really weren't prepared and were shocked and distressed that when he was not available and their partner were shocked and distressed when she was not available because they really didn't understand how difficult it would be in this day and age to maintain frequent communications with all the technology we have available all of the participants in your study were females. Is that right. Yes. Did you involve the children at all and their communications. We had one military dependent who was interviewed but we made a decision after that trial interview that the issues were so different than the ones that were pertaining to our research questions and our theoretical framework that that really needed to be part of another study that to think and which brings me to future research that you are planning or working on right now related to this. Where does this go.

[00:18:07] I think we're still kind of working on writing up our recommendations from this study and really thinking about the impact of the increased technology on things like women's independence but also that next generation that is used to having all of the technology and just how are their expectations different. So I think there's a lot of places that we may go with. And we have to wrap up this one first right. Alexa yes a couple of follow on studies that we've considered include looking specifically at relationships that were begun online not face to face and looking at differences. Once those relationships were impacted by increased geographical distance and the other is the one you had mentioned before is looking at military children. Because women in our sample some of them did have children and commented on their perceived importance of children seeing their absent parent and that absent parents need to visualize to see the child as they were developing. And yet the theme that we picked up in this study is that it was somewhat disappointing that these technologies are not very accessible to young children and yet we know which one might expect knowing child development and to some extent the web supported communications were very driven by that need to see the children even though there were frequent interruptions due to technological difficulties and web support communications were usually much shorter than they had expected a much less satisfying than they had expected.

[00:19:53] The other issue that has to be explored which is more from a military standpoint military culture that would be difficult to get at but it did emerge as one of the themes from this study is that power effects of military culture on the fully acculturated women compared to the women who are not fully acculturated we saw themes of greater distress among the younger less assimilated military partners women because they didn't really as I say their expectations were violated and they didn't understand why. And they really weren't acculturated to understand that their military member might deliberately choose not to communicate with them at times because of mission demands and that they might not have fully been prepared for assuming the role of a single parent assuming the role of a fully independent woman dealing with everything all the business of the possessions and the legalities and etc. etc. by themselves. Do you think that was influenced by the hope and the

fantasy that there would be constant ongoing interactions. Absolutely. They didn't really perceive that this type of long distance relationship would be really different and that military spouses have to be empowered independent women facing their own lives and basically able to function at a high level as single parents which gets to our interest of course in patriarchal power structures because the military is perceived as a hyper masculine culture which tends to be associated with patriarchal expectations and the younger women we're certainly not immune to that and appeared to be differentially adversely affected when their men were not making decisions providing income available to have input on decisions and so on. Now the older women who are more acculturated into the military some of whom had been in the military themselves therefore were much more acculturated had much more realistic expectations and fully understood that at times they wouldn't have communication because the military member had to focus on the mission and didn't want to be distracted by personal family issues.

[00:22:13] And on the other hand that they themselves had to function very independently as the head of household and that they also had to make decisions in a sense to protect the military spouse from information about problems or conflict on the home front that they couldn't do anything about it sort of raises the question for me given perfect communication and terms of no technological failures. I guess I'm struck and maybe is just the naive assumption but I'm struck by how having sort of ongoing continuous communication there are certainly obvious benefits to that. But one downside might be not just the distraction you're talking about but there's a way in which to keep home or the service member at front of mind. And you can never really it's like an open wound. The creation and must be very hard to turn away from it and just focus on what you need to do day to day. I would think yes and some of our military spouses certainly communicated that that they felt that again this was in contrast to the other example we mentioned who created greater independence right. There were some who felt totally controlled by the military schedule of their spouse that they had to be in really did not confirm hypothesis that they actually had to be more at the beck and call of the male rather than less. And I would just think in addition to that it would also just be so forefront in their minds all the time. You know sure and the anxiety can't let it go right. And the possibility of somehow hearing in a tone of voice or seeing visually that something is off something isn't right and then obsessing about that over focusing on that without any real answers. Now the other thing that was interesting in terms of power dynamics was the role of money. Jayshree could you comment on that. Sure.

[00:24:09] One thing that we found was depended on who had purchased. I guess it's especially for long distance relationships that were not in the military but when the male had purchased the equipment say that he had bought an iPhone for his girlfriend or something. Then he controlled the communication and he felt he could tell her when or when not to use that device and so she felt very controlled. And technology actually ended up having a huge impact on the relationship and on the power structure and the relationship. That's very interesting. I wonder have you thought about looking at families with deployed family members if a family member were female and the male partner was left at home. Whether the dynamics would be the same in the ways that you've described them or whether you think there'd be different. Interestingly there is a rise in dual career military couples now. So the issue seems to be much more when there are children involved of course. If the mother is deployed and we know from the data that divorce rates have gone up steadily in the military with the exception of males in the Navy during the current era and that divorce rates for female military members with children are extremely high. Be interesting to look at whether that relates to the kinds of findings you're saying. Yes indeed. And the other monetary issue that came up that we didn't quite expect was also who's paying for the gas when they are have the possibility of Face-To-Face during like an R and R break or if it's its college relationship during a break in the college year.

[00:25:51] And who owns a car who has that money pay for the gas was an issue for some couples

because who pays. Controls the relationship wow. Because that relationship sort of gets narrowed to one channel in some ways. On the military side as Jayshree mentioned this came out more as a theme on the civilian side but on the military side it did come up in a couple of instances where the military members had to purchase a very expensive internet plan or sell plan in country in order to have access to telecommunications particularly earlier in the conflict. These were so expensive that they could be a serious barrier for an enlisted family because you know our enlisted personnel at the entry level if they have a family of four they're eligible for food stamps. So even though they're employed there may be severe financial constraints on these working class families. And so sometimes that became a relationship conflict. You know what's your priority. Are you going to pay for the very expensive plan. If not how are we going to maintain our communications. What comes first the army or the family. Now in terms of the money expenditures so would you think it would be advisable for the military itself to provide these services. Yes. And that fact that has increasingly occurred MWR are which is morale welfare and recreation department within the military has increasingly budgeted to provide greater communications access to military members and also has sponsored unit plans where a group can go in and buy a plan. And so the individual cost is reduced. This is fascinating I guess are there any additional comments or information you'd like to give our listeners about your study.

[00:27:37] I think one thing is for social workers working with these families is this power differential is in cyberspace. So it's sort of invisible. So knowing about it and so that you can ask the right questions for the social worker working with the family is really important. You might not think about these things when you're thinking a lot of people say oh more technology better. So we have to really think about how it's being is and what the impacts of it are which I think the study highlight. And the other thing I would just add is I think it's very very important for social workers who are working with couples since the possibility of online beginnings of relationships and long distance phases in relationships has increased dramatically due to our general post-industrial technological age and what we have to do to get employment and so forth. And the rise of dual career couples partly related to the rise of feminism and more equal opportunity. Not completely but more equal opportunity for women in the workplace. All of those contribute to the increased likelihood that there will be long distance phases to virtually any intimate relationship that men and women have particularly in the Westernized post-industrial societies and so I think it's very important for social workers to look at prevention and look at the expectation piece the unrealistic preparation for the long distance days in terms of what the perception is and expectation is and what the different reality may be and how to prepare for that. Well thank you. That's been fascinating conversation about telecommunications in this modern world and its effect on deployed and deployed families.

[00:29:17] I very much appreciate you doing this with us. Thanks so much. Thank you. You've been listening to Dr. Alexa Smith-Osborne and Dr. Jayshree Jani discussed cyber marriage and the effects of multiple modes of communication on the relationships affected by military deployments in social work. Hi I'm Nancy Smith professor and dean of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history our programs and what we do we invite you to visit our Web site at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu.