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Veteran Status, Extramarital Sex, and Divorce: Findings from the 1992 National Health and Social Life Survey

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KEYWORDS: Military families, veterans, extramarital sex, infidelity, divorce

RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS:

- This study documents the prevalence of ever having had extramarital sex by veteran status and the association between ever having extramarital sex and ever being divorced.
- An association between veteran status and ever having had extramarital sex could emerge from: factors that pre-date military service and affect both selection into the military and the propensity to engage in extramarital sex (e.g., risk-taking); factors that emerge during the active duty period (e.g., spousal separations due to deployment); and/or factors that emerge during the veteran period (e.g., more work-related separations among veterans than non-veterans).
- Extramarital sex is known to be associated with an increased likelihood of divorce and some research suggests that military and veteran marriages are also at increased risk for divorce. However, it is not known whether veteran status differences in extramarital sex explain veteran status differences in divorce or whether the association between extramarital sex and divorce is the same for veterans and non-veterans.
- This research shows that: veterans are twice as likely as non-veterans to report ever having had extramarital sex (32.17% versus 16.78%) and that this difference persists after controlling for sociodemographic and early-life factors; veteran status and extramarital sex are independently associated with an increased odds of ever being divorced, with the odds of ever being divorced being particularly high among veterans who reported extramarital sex; and the effect of extramarital sex on divorce is the same for veterans and non-veterans. The findings are less conclusive for women than men, at least in part because of the small number of female veterans in the study.

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ABSTRACT:

"Despite perceptions that infidelity is common among military and veteran populations, there is relatively little evidence documenting the prevalence of extramarital sex among persons with a history of military service or its consequences for marital stability. Using data from the 1992 National Health and Social Life Survey, we estimate multivariate logistic regression models to examine the associations between veteran status, extramarital sex, and divorce among ever-married persons aged 18 to 60 years. We also conduct supplemental analyses of gender differences. We find that 32.17% of veterans report extramarital sexual relationships, which is twice the rate among nonveterans in this sample. Controlling for sociodemographic and early-life factors, veterans are significantly more likely than nonveterans to report extramarital sex and to have ever divorced, whereas extramarital sex has a strong, independent association with divorce. We conclude that veteran status is strongly associated with extramarital sex and divorce, at least among men; extramarital sex and divorce might also be elevated among female veterans, but research that uses larger, representative samples of female veterans is needed to confirm those associations. The higher rates of infidelity among veterans may be related to selection factors; military experiences, such as deployment; or postmilitary factors. The current research provides a foundation for further research that aims to explicate the mechanisms underlying this association."

Implications

FOR PRACTICE

In this national study, the authors found that rates of extramarital sex and divorce were significantly higher for male veterans, but not for female veterans, possibly due to the much smaller number of female veterans included in the sample. For men, veteran status was associated significantly with an increase in the likelihood of divorce that was independent of the association between extramarital sexual relationships and divorce. Veterans who had not engaged in extramarital sex were also more likely to have ever divorced, which suggests that military and veteran marriages may face strains that are unrelated to the occurrence of extramarital sex but increase the odds of divorce. Although rates of extramarital sex were documented to be higher among veterans than non-veterans, most veterans did not engage in extramarital sexual relationships. The high rate of extramarital sex documented in this study suggests that clinicians and practitioners working with military and veteran populations should continue to be familiar with methods of assisting couples with issues of infidelity. Counselors should be prepared to engage in both individual and couples counseling for military spouses, active duty service members and veterans. Clinicians must also be prepared to address the full range of issues that emerge in marriages, as well as issues that are specific to active duty military personnel and veterans.

FOR POLICY

Various programs are available to help military couples and families cope with the stresses of active-duty service and military family life, civilian reintegration and being a veteran. In one of these programs, the Strong Bonds program, Army Chaplains work with spouses and families to provide support. This program and others like it, are the result of Department of Defense (DOD) directives aimed at developing policies and programs to support military families. The DOD should continue to develop and fund programs that support military spouses and families. The findings from this study suggest that there may also be a significant benefit to establishing an ongoing evaluation process to determine whether current programs are able to successfully assess and respond to infidelity-related concerns or whether new initiatives are required to respond to these issues. Because concerns about infidelity have been linked to military spouse well-being and cited as a significant source of stress for military service members, the Veterans Health Administration may also wish to respond with policies aimed at improving the mental health and well-being of active duty members and spouses through targeted counseling services. New initiatives may be needed to support veterans and their spouses and families.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This study provides a foundation on which future, more refined studies can build. In future studies, researchers should aim to gather more detailed data on military service experiences, as well as information about the timing of the extramarital affair in order to determine whether the infidelity occurred prior to, during or after the period of active duty service. Longitudinal studies would be ideal for determining the causes and consequences of extramarital sexual relationships. This information could be especially useful to interventions targeted at preventing infidelity or counseling military couples after deployment. Future studies should also collect more detailed information about the number of marriages, in which marriage the extramarital affair occurred, the number of extramarital partners, the duration or intensity of the extramarital involvement, the extent of romantic involvement and information on civilian spouses' extramarital activities. Researchers should also measure marital quality and marital distress, which are related to the risk of extramarital sex and divorce in both military and civilian couples. Larger, representative samples of female veterans are needed. There is also a need for more current, in-depth data on extramarital activity among military service members, spouses and veterans, as the data used in this study is now two decades old. More current data would allow for a comparison of extramarital activity between service eras and would be particularly relevant for policy and program development. A limitation of the current investigation is that the majority of veterans served prior to the establishment of the All-Volunteer Force and no veterans from Operation Enduring Freedom/Operation Iraqi Freedom were included. Factors such as age at marriage, risk-taking propensity, deployment experiences, and conditions resulting from combat exposure, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, should also be included in future studies. Finally, future research should focus on studying the impact of multiple deployments and time spent away from spouses in relation to the occurrence of extramarital affairs in military families. Deployments are known to affect communication, intimacy and closeness and, to the extent that extramarital affairs occur during the active duty period, may be a primary engine driving the association between military service, extramarital sex and divorce.

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