

PARENT/CHILD DISTAL RELATIONSHIPS: A LOOK AT COMMUNICATION
USED BEFORE, DURING, AND AFTER A PARENTAL ABSENCE

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Abstract

This project examined communication in distal parent-child relationships. Distal relationships are relations in which people are physically separated for a period of time. Little research has focused on distal relationships, but they are a common form of family relationship, and often have considerable impact on all family members. In this study, the focus was families which had a parent leave their partner and child(ren) for 2 months or longer. The study investigated uncertainty reduction and uncertainty management among family members, using systems theory as a general framework for analysis. Participants were 54 parents and children from families who had a parent separated by incarceration or military deployment. Participants were interviewed individually about their experiences within 2 years of the parent's return. Results showed that families who communicated about the absence before departure had less of a negative impact on children's well-being. In addition, this study advances maintenance and uncertainty literature by illustrating that these participants maintained their relationships while the parent was absent by using a set of communication strategies and by managing their emotional climate with three closeness techniques and three distancing techniques. Results illustrated that the return home of the parent was often difficult with issues pertaining to responsibilities, regaining trust, and role changes. The findings in this study have implications for research on communication and meaning, regulating closeness and distance in relationships, and use of relational maintenance behaviors. The findings both support and add to previous research done on personal and family relationships.

CHAPTER ONE: Rationale

Parenting has become more complex in recent times due to the changing family and it is important that parents and their children maintain relationships with each other during these changes. With the inability of children to choose parents, it is essential that parent and child relationships, specifically the nonresidential parent and child relationship, receive increased and adequate attention in research (Wilber & Wilber, 1988). Nonresidential parents are parents who do not live with their children due to imprisonment, military, divorce, separating from the child's biological parent, and/or work or school related separation. Nonresidential parents can live in the same area as their children or live in another city or town. Nonresidential parents that live in another city or town and/or are not able to see their children on a regular and frequent basis experience a distal relationship with their children.

Distal relationships are worth examining because they create change in the family system, and time apart is often one of the primary sources of relational uncertainty (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). There are three main reasons why this research should be done. First, there are growing numbers of parents who leave their children on a temporary basis. Second, even though the numbers are growing, families with distal parents are seen as nontraditional. Therefore, there is a lack of systematic research on distal families and also a lack of social support because there is a general misunderstanding. Finally, because these families are seen as nontraditional and incomplete, society has not provided guidelines for communication. This research should be done to help families communicate before, during, and after the distal experience. Time apart may be a source of uncertainty, but not communicating while apart could create even more stress. There is

a lack of communication research examining the family system when there is a distal parent and it is important to examine considering the vast amount of families that are experiencing temporal separations of one parent. More and more parents are experiencing distal relationships with their families mostly due to imprisonment, military service, divorce, separation from the child's biological parent, and work or school related separation. For example, parental incarceration rates are higher than ever before. The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) reported in 2000 that almost 1.5 million minor children (17 years old and younger) had a parent in prison. BJS reported that the number of minor children with an imprisoned father (1,372,700) rose 58% from 1991 to 1999 compared to the 98% increase during the same time period in the number of minors with an imprisoned mother. Similarly, the 2002 demographic report by the Military Family Resource Center claimed that there are approximately 1.2 million minor dependents of those on active duty.

In terms of separation/divorce, more families than ever are experiencing transitions from divorce to single-parent households, and eventually to stepfamilies (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000) and since an estimated 1 out of 3 marriages is a remarriage for one or both spouses, this represents a large group of marriages and families in the United States today (Ganong & Coleman, 2004). Essentially, divorce and/or remarriage can increase the likelihood for parent to become nonresidential by moving away from their children into another house in the same vicinity or to another area altogether.

Parents also separate from their children because a parent may leave for school or work related reasons. Explanations for the rising levels of these types of families include

the rise of women in professional occupations (Gross, 1980; Kirschner & Walum, 1978). For mothers with children under age eighteen, the United States has gone from less than 30 percent in the labor force in 1960 to less than 30 percent *not* in the labor force in 1999 (Hoffman & Youngblade, 1999).

It is evident that families with distal parents are growing, but they are still unique because they do not follow the proscribed guidelines of the typical nuclear family of mother, father, and children under the same household. In 1978, Cherlin presented the incomplete institution hypothesis to explain how remarried families were not institutionalized in the sense that society provides guidelines for proper behavior in everyday family life. Rituals and norms are created to guide interactions among family members and between family members and the wider society. As Cherlin pointed out, remarried families are an incomplete institution because there is an absence of language, norms, and laws to help guide family members' behaviors.

Although Cherlin's focus was on remarried families, the incomplete institution could also apply to parent/child relationships that are not able to see each other on a regular basis. An example of the incomplete institution in regard to parent/child relationships is the fact that researchers and society find it difficult to pinpoint a term for those parents who are physically apart. One reason is that there is a lack of systematic research in the long distance context and the research that does exist is inconsistent in terms of how long distance is defined (Maguire, 2004). For example, intact families with a parent that is physically apart from their children and families should not be termed "long distance" because they may be in the same city, but in prison. Additionally, using the term physically separated insinuates that the parents have actually separated and/or

divorced. Although that may be the case, there still needs to be a term that embodies all parent/child relationships in which the whole family is intact but one parent is not able to see their family on a regular basis.

In a study on long distance romantic relationships, Maguire (2004) coined the term “distal” to represent those romantic relationships that were previously termed long distance. Maguire’s definition of distal romantic relationships is one that is complete and addresses the problems with the terms “long distance” and “separated” and does not only embody romantic relationships but also parent/child relationships. Therefore, distal parent/child relationships in this research is conceptualized as committed and interdependent relationships in which they perceive a situational constraint that limits their ability to be together on a regular and frequent basis.

There is a societal standard that parents should be the primary caregivers of their children (Eyer, 1996) and when parents are distal, they are not abiding by the standards set by society. Societal standards often result in stigmas placed on individuals who go against what society believes is best for each family. Not only are stigmas placed on parents in general for “leaving” their children, women have an additional stigma because of their gender. Although attitudes are changing regarding women in the work force (Hoffman & Youngblade, 1999), society still views mothering as vital to children’s well-being and it is often argued that women should not leave their children to go to work. The same could be argued for mothers who take a job in another state or go to school in another state.

Furthermore, popular views of “different” lifestyles are generally pessimistic. Unfamiliar family patterns often raise concerns about the problems that such a lifestyle

may create for the family (Bunker, Zubek, Vanderslice, & Rice, 1992). There may be strained relationships with others outside the family because relatives and friends who view the distal lifestyle as deviant and not following the traditional nuclear family form will find it difficult to provide support. For example, distal parents have an ambiguous social status as “married singles” and this often creates difficulty in maintaining friendships (Bunker et al., 1992; Kirschner & Walum, 1978).

Distal parenting is not seen as normal in society because of the family patterns that are uncharacteristic of the traditional family form. Because of this, communication is affected. Communication is a key part of parenting and distal separation leads to changes in how parents and their children communicate. However, because these types of families are seen as incomplete institutions, society has not provided guidelines for proper behavior in this type of family (Cherlin, 1978). For example, there are no proscribed guidelines for how parents and children should communicate about the loss of a parent who is there emotionally but not physically (Golish & Dial, 2002).

By showing that families with distal parents are worthy of attention because of the growing numbers and that they are viewed as incomplete institutions, there is even more to gain by doing this research in terms of helping families communicate before, during, and after the distal experience. Although the distal definition embodies parent/child relationships that are distal because one parent moves away due to divorce and/or separation, this research will focus on parent/child relationships that are seen as temporary because it is important to examine the pre-separation, separation, and reentry of family members and only in temporary distal separations is there a reentry of one parent into the family.

Due to the vast amount of research on divorce, this study will draw from those studies and transfer some ideas to the distal parenting situation. These examples will be drawn to help explain the departure of one parent. However, temporary situations where the parent eventually returns to the family has yet to be thoroughly examined. For example, single parent situations most often occur after a divorce and/or separation but they also occur “temporarily” when, for example, one parent goes away for a year to school in another city but then returns back into the home. When one parent leaves, each family is usually in a single-parent situation (Everett & Everett, 2001) and there needs to be more understanding of how communication can positively impact these transitions. For example, although not focusing on the long distance aspect, research on divorce has paid special attention on the impact of the nonresidential parent and their impact on child well-being (e.g. Amato & Rezac, 1994; Furstenberg & Nord, 1985). Amato and Rezac (1994) claimed that children’s development can be hindered following divorce because the quantity and quality of contact with nonresidential parents decreases.

It is important to understand the impact of distal parenting on children and of the importance of regular parent-child contact in sustaining meaningful parent/child relationships during periods of parental absence (Hairston, 1998). However, studies focusing on the distal parent/child relationship are rare so a discussion of these other types of relationships (e.g., couple relationships, divorced/separated families without a distal situation, etc.) is warranted.

The family systems theory is an appropriate theory to use to analyze distal parenting because it shows how one person’s absence can affect the whole family system. The family systems theory involves the notion that the parts of a system are connected

and interdependent such that change in one part of the system influences other parts of the system (Nichols & Nichols, 2000). In discussing the family systems perspective, Nichols and Nichols (2000) asserted that families have a shared sense of history, experience some degree of emotional bonding, monitoring of self, assign cause and effect in behaviors, and have complex relationships.

Although family systems theory is not a communication theory, communication is one of the central elements because communication constructs family identity and without communication, families would cease to exist. In a philosophical piece, Tinder (1980) stated that the “concepts of community and communication seem to have fallen into separate spheres of discourse” (p. 80). Tinder claimed that such a split is destructive because without communication, communities would not exist. Similarly, in families, like communities, communication constructs family identity. Wood (2000) claimed that communication creates the relational culture because communication is the primary way we express ourselves, learn about others, and work out issues in relationships. Wood clearly stated that “the pivotal role of communication in shaping and continuously reshaping human connections reminds us that communication is a generative process that creates understandings between people, defines relationships and partners’ identities, composes rules for interaction, and establishes the overall climate of intimacy” (p. 11). Wood summed up the argument by claiming that relationships are always in a continual process of change and are never static.

Without communication among the different parts, the system would not work. Consequently, it is important to study relationships in which members have a difficult time communicating, such as distal parents and their children. Families with a distal

parent are subjected to unique stressors such as frequent separations and subsequent reorganizations of family life. Although specifically talking about military families, Drummet, Coleman, and Cable's (2003) discussion of family roles and boundaries could be applied to other types of distal parenting. Drumett et al. claimed that renegotiation of boundaries and family roles occur after separation. Family boundaries determine who does and does not participate in the family and what roles each family member enacts.

Separation can create role and boundary ambiguity when it becomes unclear as to who has what role. For example, after a parent leaves, there may be confusion as to who will do the disciplining. If the distal parent was the one who normally disciplined and left without communicating to the other parent and children about disciplining, there could be confusion and resentment if the parent at home does it differently. Additionally, a family that is normally private without accepting help outside the family may find it necessary to drop some boundaries and ask friends and relatives to help with childcare once the parent has left. These are just two fictional examples of what could happen. Research needs to examine how communication before, during, and after the separation can help ease the distal transitions. Additionally, these transitions often create uncertainties in distal relationships. Knobloch and Solomon (1999) asserted that one reason for uncertainty in relationships is time apart which has a clear link to make research on distal parent/child relationships worthy of attention. Research has not thoroughly examined uncertainty reduction in parent/child distal relationships. Therefore, the uncertainty reduction theory (Berger & Calabrese, 1975) will also be used in this research.

The purpose of this research is to examine how distal families communicate before the parent leaves, while the parent is gone, and after the parent has returned into

the household. Specifically, this research will examine how families manage their uncertainties and examine how communication is used to reestablish balance in the family system. Therefore, after a general discussion of family system and uncertainty reduction and uncertainty management theories, the literature review will discuss the following: Distal relationships, children's well-being, pre-separation, separation, and reunion. Within the sections of pre-separation, separation, and reunion there will be a discussion of family systems concepts (i.e., boundaries and roles, ability to adapt to change, and emotional climate), and maintenance factors. The research questions asked in the literature review were used to guide the methods section and to propose a qualitative study that was done on distal parent/child relationships.

CHAPTER TWO: Literature Review

Family Systems Theory

The family systems theory is a theory that looks at a family as a whole and examines change within a family. Family systems derived from General Systems Theory (GST) which was largely developed by von Bertalanffy (1952, 1968). Before the 1940's, von Bertalanffy introduced systems theory in physical scientific terms, but then pioneered GST in the 1940's with the English version published in 1952. GST was introduced as a new paradigm which was broad enough to include all the sciences. A system was defined as sets of elements standing in interrelation among themselves and with the environment. Families fall under the rubric as systems and family communication researchers often use this theory to explain the family as a whole instead of focusing on the individual.

The versions of family systems theory are diverse. Rosenblatt (1994) claimed that the diversity is due to the fact that it is difficult and perhaps not productive to work from a total systems perspective. There are many family systems concepts to examine and instead of skimming over all of them, scholars and therapists often write on fragments of the theory to obtain more depth in their research. In general, families examined under the rubric of family systems theory are thought to have the following characteristics:

Wholeness, interdependence, equifinality, inputs and outputs, interactive complexity and punctuation, openness, patterns and change, and complex relationships (Watzlawick, Beavin, & Jackson, 1967; Kantor & Lehr, 1975; Speer, 1970; von Bertalanffy, 1968). A brief description of these family systems characteristics follows. Because the theory is so widely used many researchers have used these concepts so it should be noted that these characteristics are not limited to the researchers listed.

Wholeness (or nonsummativity) refers to the fact that a system cannot be taken for the sum of its parts (Watzlawick et al., 1967), and it is important to understand how the family function as a whole. Interdependence is the idea that the behavior of each family member is related to and dependent upon the behavior of others (von Bertalanffy, 1968). Equifinality is the family's ability to get to one place by using different avenues (von Bertalanffy, 1968). Inputs and outputs can be thought of as the information or communication that moves in and out of a system (Kantor & Lehr, 1975). Inputs can be such things as a phone call into the family or money from employers and outputs include work in the community, money spent on goods, or even criminal activity. Interactive complexity and punctuation means that cause and effect are interchangeable because each act triggers new behavior as well as responds to previous behaviors and family members try to place blame when the behaviors should be punctuated or stopped (Watzlawick et al., 1967). Openness is the energy, matter, and information flow between boundaries of the family and surrounding environments (Kantor & Lehr, 1975; Walsh, 1982). Patterns are within families because all systems need some stability and constancy to make them predictable, but while some stability is necessary, some flexibility is needed as families evolve over time (Speer, 1970). Complex relationships refer to the concept that all systems have levels and are embedded in other systems or suprasystems (Kantor & Lehr, 1975). For example, within a family, there may be the mother/father relationship, but there are also child/father, child/mother and sibling relationships that result in other subsystems.

One core foundation of the family systems theory is the idea of distance regulation. Kantor and Lehr (1975) suggested that distance regulation, or negotiating the

emotional climate, is one of the major tasks a family faces. Kantor and Lehr proposed the distance regulation model as a way to examine families. In this model, every family has a way of thinking about itself that is called the family paradigm and can be observed by examining the family process or the patterned interactions. They proposed that distancing falls into six dimensions (i.e., affect, power, meaning, space, time, and energy).

Constantine (1986) added two more dimensions - content and materials. Affect (i.e., preferred levels of affection, intimacy, and nurturance), power (i.e., desired orientation toward freedom to decide), meaning (i.e., having a sense of purpose in life), and content (i.e., the knowledge children learn) are target dimensions, or the goals families desire to achieve. Space (i.e., territory, privacy, emotional distance, closeness, psychological or physical distance), time (i.e., scheduling and use of time), energy (i.e., amount of energy required for activity), materials (i.e. the amount of resources acquired) are access dimensions which relate to family members' need for safety and participation.

The way a family regulates distance will determine the family paradigm, or whether the family is open, closed, random (Kantor & Lehr, 1975) or synchronous (Constantine, 1986). An open family is one that tries to balance the needs of the individual as well as the family as a whole. This is often difficult because goals are subject to change only by consensus and often a decision cannot be made. A closed family is one that values stability and togetherness. They value the group over individual needs and boundaries are often rigid. Random families almost always prioritize needs of individuals over the group. They value creativity, stimulation, autonomy, and there is a much less clear hierarchy as they feel that rules will stifle children. Synchronous families have to believe the same things and do the same things and nobody is allowed to have

different opinions. Synchronous families are different than closed because in closed, everyone has different opinions. The family paradigm will determine the emotional climate, boundaries and roles, and their ability to adapt to change. These family systems concepts will be examined regarding parent and child distal relationships. Before those concepts are discussed, it is important to understand that families experience uncertainty in distal situations and this can ultimately affect the family system.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory

When individuals face uncertainty in a situation they are likely to seek information to reduce the uncertainty (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Berger and Calabrese (1975) formulated uncertainty reduction theory (URT) on the basis that humans have a natural tendency to make sense of their world and want to reduce the uncertainties around them. The uncertainty reduction theory is also applicable to established relationships even though it is considered a theory of relational development (e.g., Planalp & Honeycutt, 1985). This theory suggests that in order for relationships to be maintained, relational partners must manage their uncertainty by constantly updating their knowledge of themselves, their partners, and their relationships (Dainton & Aylor, 2001).

There are different types of relational uncertainty (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999). There is self uncertainty (i.e., asking questions like ‘why did I do that?’), partner uncertainty (i.e., emerges from the inability to predict the other person’s attitudes and behaviors within interaction), and relationship uncertainty (i.e., people may experience doubt about the status of the relationship). One of the primary sources of relational uncertainty is time apart (Knobloch & Solomon, 1999), and research suggests that parents can reduce their uncertainty through communication (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Seltzer,

1991). Specifically, families can reduce uncertainty when establishing rules with their children, talking to their children, and by using many other forms of communication. For example, Coleman, Ganong, and Weaver (2001) claimed that the parental actions of setting, explaining, and upholding guidelines are essential to positively influence their children. However, when situational constraints such as distance or prison walls are added into the relationship, it is more difficult to utilize these parental actions.

Uncertainty management. Uncertainty reduction theory was originally formulated to explain how people reduce their uncertainties (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). However, there have been modifications to URT since its conception. It has been found that there are different ways to reduce uncertainties (e.g., Kramer, Dougherty, & Pierce, 2004) and that the goal is to not always reduce uncertainty but to manage it (e.g., Gudykunst, 1995). For example, Kramer et al. (2004) examined pilots' reactions to communication and uncertainty during the acquisition of their airline by another airline. They used both quantitative and qualitative data and the qualitative data suggested that not all pilots used information seeking as a way to reduce uncertainty. While some sought information, others avoided or delayed seeking it. These results were consistent with Kramer's (1999) argument that people may reduce uncertainty through cognitive processes rather than by seeking information. Kramer's (1999) research also suggested that individuals may have competing motives that inhibit information seeking and gaining information may actually increase or decrease uncertainty and liking.

The results from Kramer et al.'s (2004) research was consistent with Gudykunst's (1995) idea that uncertainty is not always reduced but managed. Individuals have different levels of tolerance for uncertainty (Kellerman & Reynolds, 1990) and

Gudykunst (1995) claimed that uncertainty motivates information seeking only when it is above minimum threshold and below a maximum threshold. Gudykunst's anxiety/uncertainty management theory (AUM) focused on intercultural communication but it can be applied to any situation where differences between people spawn doubts and fears.

Although using many similar concepts, Brashers, et al. (2000) results differed from Gudykunst's (1995) extension of URT. Specifically, Gudykunst assumed that the predominant emotion experienced in conjunction with uncertainty is anxiety. However, Brashers et al. (2000) believed that other emotions (e.g., hope, optimism, thrill, insecurity, torment) can be a part of the uncertainty experience. Therefore, to develop of theory of communication in the uncertainty management process, Brashers et al. (2000) conducted a study with participants who are living with HIV or AIDS. They claimed that individuals appraise uncertainty for its meaning. Uncertainty that is appraised as danger is associated with emotions such as anxiety or distress. Additionally, communication is a primary tool for managing appraised uncertainty. One of the ways that individuals can manage uncertainty (and thus the emotional responses to it) is by managing interaction (e.g., by choosing to seek information or to avoid information).

In order to specifically discuss how family systems theory and uncertainty reduction and/or management applies to distal parent/child relationships, it is necessary to describe what types of distal parent/child relationships exist and how the different types have an effect on children's well-being.

Distal Relationships

Previous research on what was termed “long distance” relationships (LDRs) have focused on military families (e.g., Duvall, 1945), college students holding a long distance relationship (e.g., Carpenter & Knox, 1986; Guldner, 1996), and more recently on dual-career couples and commuter marriages (e.g., Gross, 1980; Jackson, Brown, & Stewart, 2000). Although distal couple relationships are important to examine, little research has studied the family distal relationships and even more specifically, the parent/child distal relationships. These types of relationships are important to examine because verbal, nonverbal, and written communication are affected, frequently having negative ramifications on changing families. Most types of parent/child distal relationships are due to situational constraints such as parental military leaves (e.g., Dolan, 2003; Drummet et al., 2003), parental incarceration (e.g., Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003; Mazza, 2002), school/work parental absences (e.g., Gerstel & Gross, 1984; Groves & Horm-Wingerd, 1991), and for those who are divorced/separated and move to another city (e.g., Fabricius, 2003; Seltzer, 1991).

Distal parent/child relationships are important to examine because verbal, nonverbal, and written communication are affected and uncertainty can permeate the relationship if not handled properly. Although focusing on the distance aspect and not other situational constraints such as incarceration, a few researchers have argued that distance can play a negative role in the parent/child relationship. For example, Furstenberg and Nord (1985) asserted that a sharp attenuation of contact occurred if the nonresidential parent lived far away because “regular visits were much more likely if the nonresident parents lived nearby” (p. 894). Additionally, Seltzer (1991) argued that

nonresidential parents who live closer to their children can spend more time with them during which they provide meals or have the child spend the night.

Regarding parental participation, there has been a debate for years on the outcome of children's well-being resulting from working mothers (Eyer, 1996) and in general, a debate regarding the effects of nonresidential parenting on the well-being of children. It is evident that some researchers (e.g. Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Seltzer, 1991) feel nonresidential parental contact positively affects the outcome of children's well-being. However, some research suggests that nonresidential parenting does not affect the outcome of children's well-being. Although not specifically focusing on distal parenting, the following research is still important because it deals with nonresidential parents who do not live in the same household as their children.

Children's Well-Being

Research is inconsistent regarding the outcome of children with parental visitation. Resolving this discrepancy is important for distal research because it is more difficult for parents to visit their children due to situational constraints such as little money, time, or even prison walls. Some research claims that parental visitation has no effect on children's well-being (King, 1994) while other studies have argued that parental visitation has a positive impact on child well-being (Guidubaldi, Cleminshaw, Perry, Nastasi, & Lightel, 1986; White & Gilbreth, 2001).

Researchers of separation and/or divorce suggest some reasons for the inconsistent findings. Amato and Rezac (1994) wanted to understand the discrepancy in research regarding the nonresidential parental contact on their children's well-being. Amato and Rezac found that if the two households experience hostile interparental

conflict, then contact between the nonresidential parent and child is not in the best interest of the child. When children have little or no contact with the nonresidential parent, conflict between the parents was inconsequential. Amato and Rezac concluded that only when parents can cooperate and have an amiable relationship is frequent visitation between the nonresidential parent and child in the best interest of the child. Visser and Visser (1990) similarly argued that when there are parenting coalitions (when parents from both households work together), more permeable boundaries are established and children can go between households more easily.

In terms of *distal* (i.e., incarcerated, military, or school/work separation) parent/child relationships, there have also been some inconsistent findings. Clear, Rose, and Ryder (2001) stated that the only time that non-parental participation is in the child's best interest is when an incarcerated family member is problematic and that the removal of a problem family member can improve relationships among remaining family members. However, Clear et al. asserted that frequently both spousal and parent/child relationships are strained or severed as a result of incarceration. Katz (1998) stated that "children of incarcerated mothers often display low self-esteem, anxiety, low achievement motivation, poor conscience development, poor social adjustment and peer relations, depression, juvenile delinquency, aggression, drug abuse, and other problems" (p. 498). Families have an overwhelming sense of loss and they need to maintain their relationship. For example, Seymour (1998) claimed that visiting can decrease the stress of separation, enable children to maintain relationships with parents, and increase the likelihood of successful reunification.

In other distal parental research, some research claims military children have internalizing behaviors while others say the absence of their mother or father does not affect children's well being. LaGrone (1978) introduced the concept of a military family syndrome after finding that there were a high number of behavior disorders in children at a military children's mental health clinic. LaGrone did not compare his findings to civilian children and Morrison (1981) argued against the syndrome by comparing data between military and civilian children in his private practice stating there was not a significant difference between the two. Similarly, Angrist and Johnson (2000) found no evidence of an increase in disabilities in the children of service personnel and attributed the finding to the fact that there was no lost income with the absent parent. However, they did find that deployment of female soldiers and not male soldiers led to a large and statistically significant increase in divorce rates, suggesting deployment of women placed a marked strain on marriages. It could be argued that because Angrist and Johnson did not measure the children's well-being after the distal parents returned home, the results may have been different.

Regardless of the argument, one finding concerning communication and children's well-being was the following: Communication needs to occur between the parents and children. For example, Fabricius (2003) surveyed children of divorced parents and found that the unavailability of a parent due to lack of time together can damage the child's security in the relationship. Increasing the quality and quantity of parental contact with children will positively influence their well-being.

Distal parenting is a stressor in parent/child relationships and research shows that it affects children's well-being. Communication research needs to examine the different

ways parents and children can maintain their distal relationships. The communication used to manage the uncertainties that occur due to the changes in the family system is delicate. Without proper communication, pre-separation, separation, and reunion will be difficult. Therefore, the family systems theory is an appropriate avenue to examine the different changes parents and children experience in distal relationships. The boundaries and roles, ability to adapt to change, maintenance, and emotional climate are concepts relevant to the change that families face during pre-separation, separation, and reunion of a parent. Boundaries and roles and ability to adapt to change are family systems concepts that will be discussed in regard to the pre-separation phase.

Pre-Separation Phase

Boundaries and roles. The distal relationship will affect the boundaries and roles found within each family. Boundaries are a series of dividing lines separating subsystems (e.g., sibling subsystem), systems (e.g., extended family), and suprasystems (e.g., the community) and define the inside and outside of a given system (Kantor & Lehr, 1975). Family systems have boundaries that can either be rigid (i.e., those that are clearly defined and difficult to penetrate) or permeable (i.e., boundaries that fluctuate freely) and the balance between the two is delicate. Families are often dysfunctional when there are no boundaries because they need to regulate their distance.

Family boundaries determine who does and does not participate in the family. Physical separation can create boundary ambiguity when it becomes unclear as to who has what role (Boss, 1980; Drummet et al., 2003). For example, children often take on parental roles when a parent is separated from the family. With incarceration, parents are dependent upon their children to accept phone calls and in most prisons, inmates are not

allowed to touch money so the children have to walk up to the vending machines, insert money, and choose food (Mazza, 2002). Although focusing on divorce, the following example could apply to all distal parent/child relationships. When one parent leaves, each family is usually in a single-parent situation. Everett and Everett (2001) asserted that a single parent may rely on a child, often the eldest, to take on a pseudo-adult and parentified role in their single parent system. These children may become the confidants to their often sad and unhappy parents while others may become their protectors and defenders. Depending on the situation, roles that children carry may be different.

Boundary and role ambiguity (i.e., unclear boundaries and roles) may also occur when the parent who is left at home becomes the one who takes on the parental roles for two parents. For example, the parent at home is left with all the housework, bill payments, errands, taking the kids to school or extracurricular activities, etc. Gerstel and Gross (1984) claimed that most commuting couples with children often comment on the problem that the parent who remains in the primary home has to perform the duties of both parents. In addition to all the physical work that needs to be done such as housework, the parent at home must also provide most of the discipline and emotional support for their children (Gerstel & Gross, 1984). Boundary and role ambiguity may become more clear depending on a family's ability to adapt to change.

Ability to adapt to change. Any change in a family's life course, such as distal parenting, whether it is role gain or role loss is potentially stressful. The "loss" of a family member may result in the disorganization of the family unit (Lowenstein, 1984). Another concept of the family systems theory is the ability for families to adapt to change (Speer, 1970). Families have to negotiate a balanced equilibrium or a balance between

change and stability. For example, Steier, Stanton, and Todd (1982) asserted that families who cling to familiar patterns at the expense of adapting to change can be dysfunctional. Therefore, an ideal family system in terms of transitions would be one that is able to adapt to change when they have to.

It is often difficult trying to adapt to change while keeping a balanced equilibrium. For example, not only those inside prison walls suffer, but the loved ones outside suffer as well. Comfort (2003) asserted that because the United States has zero tolerance policies and severe sentencing, women and men whose loved ones are behind bars experience restricted rights, diminished resources and social marginalization even though they are legally innocent and reside outside of the prison boundaries. Comfort's (2002) ethnography on prisoners in San Quentin State Prison examined family ties during incarceration. Comfort found that wives wanted to eat "dinner" while visiting and had to purchase food out of a vending machine in place of the family meal around a table at home. Restrictions as simple as eating food can obviously put a strain on families.

Deployment in the military has a similar affect on families as a parent who is leaving for prison or leaving for work or school in another state. Dolan (2003) claimed that family separation is one of the toughest parts about military deployments because families are left behind to deal with a broken family structure, financial difficulties and ranges of emotions. The resources of the family unit, the flexibility of its division of labor, and its capacity to reorganize its internal structure determine its capability to overcome the loss of a member and regain its functional equilibrium. The equilibrium is essential to the continuing existence of the family unit (Lowenstein, 1984).

Family systems often strive for predictability and stability and reassignment of roles and renegotiation of boundaries often occur *after* a parent has physically separated from the family (Drummet et al., 2003). Often, families like to leave on a positive note and any type of communication that has a negative connotation is often not stated. For example, Drummet et al. (2003) stated that those who have relationship challenges before separation may set the issues aside to leave on a positive note. Because families strive for some predictability (Speer, 1970), not communicating about the distal separation before it occurs may have detrimental effects on the way a family deals with the change. For example, research illustrates that military children often obtain their information about war by other sources (i.e., peers, mass media, etc.) than their parents (e.g., Ryan-Wenger, 2002). Talking to children about what could be a separation in the future could prepare them for the leave and the return of their distal parents.

It seems that renegotiation of boundaries and roles could occur before the parent has physically separated to help balance the equilibrium between stability and change. Research has not examined how pre-separation communication can impact the transition of one parent leaving for a period of time. Therefore, the following research question is asked:

RQ₁: How do parents and children communicate before the parent is separated from the rest of the family?

Even if the family communicates about the transition before the distal separation, there is no guarantee that they do not feel a loss when their family changes from what they have always known. In a discussion about post-divorce families, Golish and Dial (2002) claimed that unlike when a family member dies, there are no institutionalized

proscriptions for how children should grieve the loss of a noncustodial parent who is still alive but seemingly absent because they are not physically around. This ambiguous loss results in no prescribed coping mechanisms for the noncustodial parents whose relationship with their children is “there” but “not there” like it used to be when they were living under the same household.

In addition, the parents who have left the household also feel a loss. Gerstel and Gross’s (1983) research on commuting couples (i.e., couples living in two separate areas to achieve work or school related goals that they could not do in the same town or city) found that a common drawback for commuters were feelings of lost companionship and loneliness due to the lack of common day-to-day contact and sharing events. Similarly, incarceration and military leaves also create ambiguous loss. For example, the loss connected to incarceration can be defined as ambiguous because it remains unclear, indeterminate, and not validated by the community (Boss, 1999) which then may result in little sympathy and support from others.

However, when family members do reach out to others, uncertainty is often reduced. Many times, the commuting parent receives help from friends and/or relatives (Gerstel & Gross, 1984). Similar to commuting parents, families with incarcerated (Arditti, Lambert-Shute, & Joest, 2003) and military parents (Dolan, 2003) claimed that reaching out to extended family and the community helps families cope with the loss. For example, Arditti et al. (2003) claimed that fostering a sense of community and social support may help not only to reduce feelings of isolation, alleviate emotional stress, and enhance parenting competence, but also may lessen a family’s economic vulnerability. The feeling of loss is an uncertainty that can be reduced if the individuals desire to reduce

it. Maintenance is a key component to reducing uncertainties in parent/child distal relationships during a phase of separation.

Although extreme, the following could happen to an incarcerated individual's family if their relationships are not maintained during separation. Hirsch et al. (2002) stated that any parent who goes to prison, even for a short time, faces the grave risk of losing his or her children forever. Many parents will leave prison having served their time but facing a far worse sentence: The imminent loss of all rights as parents and all contact with their children because they have not maintained contact with their children (Hirsch et al., 2002). In all types of distal family situations, when communication stops, the family system is affected and the shared sense of history and emotional bonding will cease to exist, along with all the other aspects that make the family a system, such as the complexity of relationships. The next section will discuss the separation phase and use maintenance literature to argue how vital maintenance is for distal parent/child relationships.

Separation Phase

The literature review so far has introduced the idea of distal relationships and its effect on uncertainty, well-being, and pre-separation. The idea of maintenance is utilized in the literature review as a solution to the problems that can occur due to the situational constraints. The behaviors necessary to maintain temporary distal parent/child relationships seems to be different than the research done on parent/child relationships that are distal because of divorce and/or separation of the parents. Additionally, because it is important to examine the reentry of family members into the family, temporary distal separations are examined. Relational maintenance and emotional climate are discussed.

Long distance and proximal maintenance literature is utilized to show how maintaining relationships while away can help the subsequent reentry back into the family for those parents who are distal. The emotional climate in the family system is an aspect that would determine the types of maintenance used in distal parent/child relationships. First relational maintenance is discussed.

Relational maintenance. Separation can strengthen or destroy a relationship (Carpenter & Knox, 1986). Relationships are like flowers in a garden, and they need to be weeded, watered, and trimmed. Just like gardens, work is required when one desires to maintain their relationships. Dindia and Canary (1993) claimed that literature written on maintenance often provides an unclear conceptual definition of maintenance. Although not advocating a particular definition, Dindia and Canary argued that there are four separate definitions of maintenance found in literature and because the definitions vary, each researcher should explicitly state what definition they are using. Dindia and Canary stated that maintenance can be seen as trying to keep a relationship in existence, trying to keep the relationship at a specified state or condition, keeping a relationship in a satisfactory condition, and finally, keeping the relationship in repair. Duck (1982) hinted at a couple of these definitions as well in his work on relationship dissolution and stated that individuals are in a constant flux and are continually reviewing their relationships.

Since the family systems theory is based on a family being able to grow and adapt to change, the definition of trying to keep a relationship in a specified state or condition is not used in this research. Rather, intact distal families are trying to keep their relationship in existence while the parent is away. Families will use maintenance strategies to keep the family in existence and to remain intact. The types of relationship strategies that

intact distal families use are yet to be found in research. In general, the literature base for studying relational maintenance has grown considerably, but most only show the maintenance of proximal relationships and have rarely studied the maintenance strategies of distal couples and fewer explore distal parent/child relationships. The following discussion on maintenance behaviors will examine behaviors found in proximal and long distance romantic relationships and friendships.

The research on proximal relationships has provided typologies to identify specific maintenance strategies and their ultimate success in perpetuating relationships (Ayres, 1983; Canary, Stafford, Hause, & Wallace, 1993; Dainton, Stafford, & Canary, 1994). For instance, Stafford and Canary (1991) surveyed 77 married and non-married participants and asked them how they maintained their relationships. Based on the data, the researchers developed five maintenance strategies: Positivity (perceptions of the partner's cheerfulness and optimism), openness (self-disclosure and discussion of nature of the relationship), assurances (the degree to which the partner stresses the future of the relationship), use of social networks (time spent with common affiliations), and sharing tasks (helping with day-to-day tasks). They found that all five strategies could be used to increase satisfaction. Additionally, five more maintenance strategies were added in future work of Canary et al. (1993) including: Joint activities; cards, letters, and phone calls; avoidance (i.e., evading a partner or issues that foster unconstructive conflict and/or respecting each other's privacy); antisocial behaviors (i.e., spending time with just each other at the expense of other people); and the use of humor. Dainton et al. (1994) found that assurances and positivity were the best predictors of satisfaction in marriages.

Other typologies used to successfully maintain romantic relationships have been formulated for long distance relationships (e.g., Westefeld & Liddell, 1982) which could be useful in a parent/child distal relationship. Westefeld and Liddell (1982) found the following maintenance strategies: Developing support systems for partners who are separated; developing alternative ways to communicate, including sending videotapes and gifts; discussing relational expectations and ground rules prior to the separation; developing support systems for partners who are separated; being open and honest with each other; developing and maintaining trust; focusing on the positive aspects of long distance relationships; and using face to face time wisely.

Maintenance strategies have been narrowed in Aylor and Dainton's (2002) research by stating individuals can use strategic or routine maintenance behaviors. Strategic behaviors are "behaviors that are intentionally chosen and enacted for the purpose of maintaining a relationship" and "routine behaviors are seen as behaviors at a lower level of consciousness than strategic behaviors" (p. 3). Aylor and Dainton found that long distance relationships use strategic behaviors to reduce uncertainty and it is a stronger predictor of satisfaction relative to routine maintenance. Aylor and Dainton further found that those in long distance relationships use strategic behaviors like assurances and advice because they may be uncertain about the relationship. Additionally, they claimed that geographically close relationships may use routine behaviors such as sharing tasks and networks and is a stronger predictor of satisfaction. These findings suggested that strategic maintenance was used in times of uncertainty while routine maintenance was used in times of certainty.

Research on romantic relationships provides insight into maintaining distal relationships. Sahlstein (2004) placed a more positive spin on distal romantic relationships by examining the contradictions experienced as long distance romantic partners negotiated between togetherness and separation. Using a relational dialectics approach, Sahlstein found that partners mutually enable *and* constrain each other while visiting and apart from each other. However, Guldner (1996) linked separation and depression to find that individuals in geographically separated relationships reported more difficulty with depressive symptoms than those in geographically proximal (i.e. non-separated) relationships. To keep the distal relationship going, individuals need to employ strategies that not only overcome obstacles, but also perpetuate a level of satisfaction and happiness that allow two people to endure the separation. Just as romantic relationships can be affected negatively, parent/child relationships if not properly maintained, can also be affected negatively (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Seltzer, 1991). Consequentially, it is possible that relationship maintenance strategies can be used to help manage the parent/child distal relationship.

Maintenance is clearly an important aspect in relationships. However studies have mainly focused on proximal and long distance romance and friendships, but not on the parent/child distal relationship. Sahlstein (1999) claimed that research on long distance relationships should not consider them as homogeneous because there are different relational types (i.e., romantic, friendship, family). There has been little research done on distal parenting so nonresidential literature is used in this literature review. Again, nonresidential does not necessarily mean distal because nonresidential parents could

possibly live in the same town due to something like a divorce. However, it is important to use since nonresidential parents do not live in the same household as their children.

Research has examined how nonresidential mothers and fathers can reduce their uncertainties and most of it leads to using maintenance such as communication strategies. However, nonresidential studies are important to examine in relation to distal research. Focusing on mothers, Furstenberg and Nord (1985) found that nonresidential mothers reduce their own uncertainty by visiting their children on a regular basis, having overnight visits, and having more indirect contact by phone or letter. Additionally, Golish and Dial (2002) found that everyday talk was the relational adhesive that allowed children and their noncustodial fathers to maintain a predictable pattern of behavior with one another.

Nonresidential research indicates that parents and children who have continual contact and quality communication may be able to minimize the feelings of uncertainty (Furstenberg & Nord, 1985; Golish & Dial, 2002). Similarly, everyday communication could occur in all distal relationships to reduce uncertainty. Everyday communication could happen passively, actively, or even interactively in distal relationships. The three means for reducing uncertainty are defined as the following: Passive attempts are unobtrusive observation in reactive situations, active attempts require actions and energy on the part of the observer (e.g., asking those who know the other) and interactive attempts to reduce uncertainty require actual interaction with the individual (e.g., verbal interrogation, self-disclosure, and deception detection) (Cragan & Shields, 1998).

An interactive attempt of question reduction may frequently be used in distal parent/child relationships. Kramer (2004) asserted that gradual question reduction may be

typical of many encounters regardless of relationship development or intimacy. Using the example of individuals being separated for a period of time, Kramer asserted that they may ask questions to reduce uncertainty that has developed during their separation. Strangers tend to focus on reducing descriptive uncertainties by gaining factual information, whereas friends and relational partners focus on reducing cognitive uncertainties. Passive, active, and interactive strategies could help reduce uncertainties in parent/child distal relationships and could also help the distal parent participate in child rearing. Additionally, the emotional climate is another form of maintenance that could impact uncertainty and the family system.

Another form of maintenance used in distal parent/child relationships are the behaviors used that either make individuals feel close or distant for the purpose of maintaining the existence of their relationship. The emotional climate is a concept normally discussed separately from maintenance. However, actual behaviors can be used to become close or distant from a relational partner (Hess, 2002; Hess, Daulton, & Hudson, 2004) and these behaviors could be used to maintain the existence of a parent/child distal relationship.

Emotional climate. It is evident that individuals usually define a relationship by describing the emotional climate and how close they are. However, family systems theory indicates that distance needs to be regulated or families may become dysfunctional with too much closeness or too much distance. A relationship is close to the degree that causal connections are frequent, diverse, strong, and enduring (Hess et al., 2004; Kelley et al., 1983), and a relationship is argued to be distant when there is infrequent, weak, and/or

causal interconnections and a person feels separation from a relational partner (Hess, 2002).

However, it should be noted that distance is not simply the absence of closeness behaviors (Hess, 2002). Hess (2002) conceptualized distance regulation as using specific behaviors rather than Kantor and Lehr's (1975) dimensions (i.e., affect, power, meaning, space, time, and energy). Hess's research found that individuals used distancing in relationships with disliked partners as well as liked partners. Therefore, using Hess's characteristics of distance, families could use avoidance (i.e., preventing an interaction episode from happening, changing behaviors to avoid other person, or reducing interaction during an encounter), disengagement (i.e., hiding information about self, using disengaged communication style, and/or interacting less personally), and/or cognitive dissociation (i.e., disregarding a message, derogating the other person, and/or cognitive and emotional detachment). For example, in terms of the physical separation, families may use a distancing technique such as disengagement when one is about to leave after a period of visiting each other to make the leave easier. No research found has examined the distancing behaviors that are used in families with a distal parent/child relationship.

Not only do individuals use distancing behaviors in personal relationships, they also use closeness behaviors. In a more recent study, Hess et al. (2004) formulated a three factor solution for closeness. This study was undertaken to develop a measure of relational affiliation that incorporates both closeness and distance. Relational affiliation is the degree of closeness or distance that people perceive between themselves and a partner and is the most fundamental quality of any relationship (Hess et al., 2004). Along

with the three factor solution for distance (i.e., avoidance, disengagement, cognitive dissociation), families could also use the following behaviors to create closeness: Openness (i.e., sharing information without withholding private information), exclusivity (i.e., an attempt to have more interaction with only each other), and/or cognitive processes characterizing association (i.e., paying careful attention and having positive attributions). Because the correct balance of closeness and distance is needed in families it is necessary to examine the aspect of physical separation and how separation effects distance regulation. The emotional climate in the family system is an aspect that would determine the types of maintenance used in distal parent/child relationships.

It is evident that maintenance strategies should be used in distal parent/child relationships. Some research illustrates that maintenance strategies during any separation can help with the reunion once the parent comes back into the household. Although all distal parent/child relationships are worth examining, this research will focus on military and incarcerated parental absences because parental absence is often involuntary due to incarceration or a military deployment or assignment. Military and incarcerated distal families will be analyzed in this research for three main reasons: First, statistics illustrate the growing numbers of men and women temporarily leaving their families because of a military assignment or incarceration. Although the statistics do not illustrate that parents and children actually lived together before the distal separation, the statistics are still relevant because they show the vast amount of parents going through these transitions. Second, these situations are “temporary” separations whereas parents who divorce and/or are separated often experience a terminal separation where renegotiation of boundaries, emotional climate, etc. is different than that with intact families. Third, these types of

relationships are not necessarily distinct from each other because parents face many of the same issues when they are apart such as restricted phone calls and visits.

Military and Incarceration Separation. When discussing military and incarceration, statistics speak for themselves regarding the relevancy and timeliness of this topic. In 1995, the military was the largest employer in the United States besides the federal government, with 1.58 million active duty service members and 984,000 reservists in 1995 (Angrist & Johnson, 2000). The terrorists attacks of September 11, 2001, the war in Afghanistan, the crisis in the Middle East, the war in Iraq, and the continued world war against terrorists have reemphasized the importance of national security and brought America's military back into the forefront (Drummet et al., 2003). The number of reservists jumped to 1.28 million in September 2000, and as of April 2001 there were 1.37 million active duty service members and 669,000 civilian employees (<http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/almanac>).

Not only are there large numbers of individuals in the military, there are equally large numbers of military members with children. According to the 2002 demographic report by the Military Family Resource Center, there are approximately 1.2 million minor dependents of those in active duty with 6.4% of active duty members as single parents. Angrist and Johnson (2000) asserted that in total, about 57% of enlisted personnel and 73% of active duty officers are married and about half of soldiers have children.

Military families have difficulties maintaining while they are separated. It has been argued that family life education is needed for military families (Drummet et al., 2003). Drummet et al. (2003) claimed that there needs to be methods of communication that promote family cohesion and provide honest, direct communication within families

and between families and military representatives during separation. Traditional letter writing is reliable, but transmit time is lengthy. The telephone is interactive, but initial access can be difficult and expensive. E-mail is rapid and inexpensive, but it can place service members in danger if enemies intercept vital information. Military careers clearly place special demands on families as they move frequently and soldiers are separated from their families for extended periods of time (Angrist & Johnson, 2000). Family separation is one of the toughest parts about deployments and learning how to cope is one of the necessary challenges. Families left behind are left to deal with a broken family structure, financial difficulties and ranges of emotions (Dolan, 2003).

Similar to military service, incarceration is another change that leaves families uncertain about their future. Prison incarceration rates have risen sharply since 1990. The rise has been due to an application of harsh criminal sanctions such as incarceration even for nonviolent offenses (Arditti et al., 2003). For example, the incarceration rate (number of persons in state and federal prison on any given day per 100,000 population) increased between 1980 and 2000 from 138 to 478 (Austin, Irwin, & Kubrin, 2003).

Along with the rise of incarceration rates, there are many parents in prison. About one half of the men and two thirds of the women in prison are parents (Travis & Petersilia, 2001). The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) reported in 2000 that almost 1.5 million minor children (17 years old and younger) had a parent in prison. Strikingly, BJS reported that the number of minor children with an imprisoned father (1,372,700) rose 58% from 1991 to 1999 compared to a 98% increase during the same time period in the number of minors with an imprisoned mother (126,100).

Most parents want a better life for their children, and parents who are incarcerated are no exception. Prolonged absence of a parent from the home not only threatens family cohesion but also puts excessive strain on parent/child relationships (Hairston & Lockett, 2003). Imprisonment presents major obstacles to the maintenance of family ties. For one, prisoners are not at liberty to see or talk to their children whenever they like. They cannot engage in their children's daily care, nor can they be present to assure their children's safety. They have no control over their own jobs or income and are not likely to have much to contribute to their families' financial support (Hairston, 1998).

Communication is a key part of parenting, and incarceration leads to a dramatic change in how parents and their children communicate. Verbal, nonverbal, and written communication are often negatively affected when one is incarcerated. Visiting is difficult. Katz (1998) asserted that visiting hours may not coincide with the child welfare case worker's work day and arranging special visiting times is difficult. Additionally, visits are inhibited by factors such as the geographical location of many prisons, the family's inability to afford transportation, the unwillingness of caregivers to facilitate visits, visiting rooms that are inhospitable to children, and parent's reluctance to have contact (Seymour, 1998). Hairston (1998) asserted that visiting is both psychologically and physically demanding for children and adults as the visiting environment in most prisons is poor. Some children have to endure frisk searches, rude treatment, and then have to visit in crowded, noisy, dirty, overheated facilities, or with parents and children separated by a glass barrier.

Along with visiting, phone calls are also difficult. Mazza (2002) asserted that the incarcerated are allowed to make collect calls to their families, but the high cost of collect

calls often makes it difficult for families to talk on the phone. Along with the expensive phone calls, Hairston (1998) and Mazza (2002) claimed that mail from prisons often carries the label that it is from a correctional institution so many do not want the public stigma of it coming to their home.

The difficulties of maintaining relationships while in the military or incarcerated often hinder the parent/child relationship. However, when done properly, maintenance can positively affect the parent/child relationship. Literature on distal parent/child relationships is sparse. Military and incarceration literature suggests that maintenance is important during separation and it is obvious that a “degree of contact” is needed for parent/child relationships and families to maintain the existence of their relationship. It is also evident that physical separation and barriers (e.g., prison walls) can complicate the contact that is maintained and can have a negative effect on the parent/child relationship.

It is time communication researchers examine military and incarcerated distal parent/child relationships because these relationships have been overlooked in communication literature. In terms of noncustodial parents (i.e., parents who do not have custody of their children), Golish and Dial (2002) stated that future communication research should examine what routine, everyday communication interactions enable noncustodial parents and their children to maintain close and trusting relationships. Using Westefeld and Liddell’s (1982) typology for maintaining long distance relationships may have some implications for parents and children. For example, Westefeld and Liddell claimed that developing and maintaining trust is a way to maintain relationships. Considering the child may feel abandoned due to incarceration or a military leave, a starting point for researcher may be answering the question how parents and children can

develop and sustain trust to maintain the existence of their distal relationship. Developing and sustaining trust may reduce feelings of abandonment but it is not known what strategies could be used.

It seems that distal parent/child relationships will utilize different maintenance strategies depending on the reason why the physical distance occurred and the nature of the relationship before the separation occurred. Relationship researchers have primarily used Stafford and Canary (1991) and Canary et al.'s (1993) maintenance strategies (i.e., positivity, openness, assurances, use of social networks, sharing tasks, joint activities, cards/letters/phone calls, avoidance, antisocial, and humor) in their research (e.g., Dainton et al., 1994). However, that research is primarily focused on romantic relationships and friendships. Such strategies may not be possible for other types of relationships such as parent/child relationships because they might use other maintenance strategies. Additionally, military and incarcerated families may use closeness and distance behaviors to keep the relationship in existence. Communication between parents and children is not only ideal, but it is necessary during a parent/child separation to keep a balanced equilibrium. Therefore, the following research question is asked regarding the maintenance strategies in parent/child distal relationships:

RQ₂: What maintenance strategies are used by parents and children in parent/child distal relationships?

Reunion

Just as a family has to adapt to change once the parent becomes distal, the family also has to adapt when the parent finally returns. Families have to negotiate a balanced equilibrium or a balance between change and stability. A sign of dysfunction is when

families cling to familiar patterns at the expense of adapting to change (Steier et al., 1982). For example, the distal parent who comes back into the family may be confronted with a different family system than what he or she knew before leaving. If this happens, both the family and the distal parent need to communicate and adapt to change or they may become dysfunctional.

Military reunions occur frequently in present times. The terrorists attacks of September 11, 2001, the war in Afghanistan, the crisis in the Middle East, the war in Iraq, and the continued world war against terrorists have reemphasized the importance of national security and brought America's military back into the forefront (Drummet et al., 2003). As a result more and more troops are involved in military deployments and/or assignments that have taken them away from their families. However, with more deployments and military assignments there are also a number of parents returning home to their children after they are done with their assignments. At least half of the active soldiers have children (Angrist & Johnson, 2000) and that is not even counting the number of reservists that leave their families to fight a war. This leaves many children waiting for their parents' return back into the family after their deployment or military assignment.

Military reunions are often commonly thought to be easy but that assumption is wrong. Drummet et al., (2002) claimed that a common misconception is that the difficulty of separation is instantaneously overcome when the parent returns home. However, there are issues of roles and boundaries, household management (e.g., people often do not want to relinquish their duties or feelings of unfamiliarity with management may increase tension), honeymoon effects (e.g., reunion is often romanticized and can

create too high of expectations), social support (e.g., family members may withdraw from social support to normalize daily life), children may reject or be anxious about their parent's return, and service member's physical and mental condition. Similar to military, incarcerated individuals also have a difficult time returning to the household.

Strained relationships with the family are undeniable aspects of imprisonment. In 2000, about 585,000 individuals, nearly 1600 a day, left state and federal prisons to return home (Travis & Petersilia, 2001). Participation in family living upon release from prison, presents a stressful situation even under ideal conditions, and is even more difficult when there has been little contact between the prisoner and his or her family during the prison term (Hairston & Lockett, 2003). When coming out of prison, it is evident that individuals often disrupt their families' routines (Marshall, 1998) and this often tears families apart. Bilchik, Seymour, and Kreisher (2001) asserted that in the months before release, strong emotional reactions are common in children. Children are often hurt, resentful, and angry and parents are often unsure of how they will fit back into their children's lives. Even more extreme and detrimental is the impact that the incarcerated individual's family can have on their recidivism once they return back into the family. This is important to examine because maintenance done while the parent is incarcerated may help reduce their desire to repeat a crime and imprisonment.

The concept of pre-separation, separation, and reunion is important to study in terms of incarceration rates because Hairston (1991) asserted that maintaining family ties during and after incarceration reduces recidivism, or the rate in which individuals repeat imprisonment. Researchers primarily examine the rates of repeat imprisonment instead of a repeat in criminal behavior because numbers can be associated with imprisonment

whereas criminal behavior is not always caught. O'Brien (2001) claimed that offenders in the criminal justice system find their very selfhood is defined by the crimes they have committed. Without family support the related stigma often follows them out to the streets where they often fall back into old habits which leads them back to prison as recidivists. Lanier (1993) found that the worse an incarcerated father's perception of his current relationship with his children, as measured by a level of closeness, involvement, and contact, the more likely that the father experienced depression and this could lead to recidivism.

Families are important and without their support, individuals could be more susceptible to recidivism. Thompson and Harm (2000) claimed that incarcerated parents experience anxiety, depression, regret, inadequacy, and loss; they fear a difficult reunion, yet plan to resume parenting when released. To illustrate what it feels like from the perspective of an imprisoned family member, Tracy Wiggington (2002) wrote on her experiences. Wiggington stated the following about her family:

The most devastating realization to me was that I no longer know my place within my family. I am well aware of my position within my 'family' in jail but I have no idea of where I sit with my real family. For twelve years my life has been in here and theirs has been outside. My family and I are world's apart (p. 164).

It is important that those coming out of prison feel connected to their families. The uncertainty Wiggington felt made her feel "world's [sic] apart" from her family outside the prison walls. Effective communication is needed and if individuals in prison and their families outside the prison walls do not maintain their relationships, the individual may walk out of the prison into the arms of a family they are uncertain about and do not know.

In 2001, approximately 400,000 mothers and fathers finished serving their prison or jail sentences and returned home eager to rebuild their families (Hirsch et al., 2002). Bradley, Oliver, Richardson, and Slayter (2001) claimed that return to the family is often thought of as the first option available to prisoners returning to the community. However, this alternative is not always welcome since the individual may be perceived as a destabilizing influence in the home and not welcome by family members. If unemployed, he or she may represent one more body burdening an already strained household budget. Hirsch et al. (2002) claimed that parents face a multitude of legal barriers that make it difficult for them to succeed in caring for their children like finding work, going to school, and accessing public benefits. These barriers often tear families apart.

Communication research needs to examine how families communicate and readjust after a parent returns. Research indicates the maintenance while the parent is physically separated is important, but the communication to readjust once the parent has returned for good is crucial. In fact, it is so crucial that may even helps reduce recidivism among those who were incarcerated. Because of the various situations regarding the situational constraints (i.e., military and incarceration), it could be assumed that different communication is needed once the parent has returned to reduce uncertainties and reestablish the balance needed for family systems. A starting point for researchers regarding reunion is to find out what key issues parent and children deal with once the parent has returned. Therefore the following research question is posed:

RQ₃: What communication strategies do parents and children use once the parent has reentered the family?

Not only is communication needed before and during separation, communication during reunion is also vital to the parent/child relationship. In fact, the incarcerated individual's chances of recommitting a crime are greatly increased when support from a family diminishes. Therefore, communication researchers benefit society as a whole by examining maintenance behaviors for those in prison, because it may decrease the rate of crime that pervades the streets. This may be a difference between incarcerated and military families because military families do not have to worry about recidivism. Researchers should examine the similarities and differences that incarcerated and military families face. This is valuable to know considering the situational constraints are different. Knowing the similarities and differences may help researchers transfer some ideas into the larger realm of distal parent/child relationships. Therefore the following research question is posed.

RQ₄: What are the similarities and differences between distal military and incarcerated families?

The family system is often affected negatively due to the physical separation of parents because of imprisonment and military. Therefore, the focus of this research is to find out how parents and children can maintain their relationships while a parent is distal. Research has shown that children and parents alike are affected greatly by the parental leave of absence. Because families strive for some predictability, uncertainty often occurs when there are large changes such as a parent leaving. If they do not restore the balance and if there is ambiguity in the roles and boundaries, families often become dysfunctional. The family system is always changing and once the parent reenters the family system, the family needs to readjust. Communication studies will be benefiting a

large portion of society by researching the different ways to maintain distal parent/child relationships, keep boundaries and roles clear, reduce uncertainties, and communicate to help parents reenter their families smoothly. In order to answer the research questions the interpretive paradigm was utilized in this research which is described in chapter three.

CHAPTER THREE: Methods

The interpretive paradigm was utilized in this research. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) stated that “realities are socially constructed by and between human beings in their expressive and interpretive practices...and research should privilege deep understanding of human actions, motives and feelings” (p. 11). Research can accomplish deep understanding by using the interpretive paradigm which concentrates on explaining the role that symbolic structures play in shared meaning systems among individuals (Mumby, 2001). In other words, the interpretive paradigm is used to make sense of the world by examining communicative behaviors and how people construct meaning through communication. Because the purpose of the study was to examine how parents and children make sense of their long distance experience through verbal and nonverbal communicative behaviors, using the interpretive paradigm was appropriate. To address the research questions, I analyzed the discourse of parents’ and children’s experiences of their distal relationship that resulted from incarceration or military deployments/assignments.

Kvale (1996) asserted that there are seven steps to qualitative interviewing: Thematizing (i.e., thinking about the topic of interest to the researcher and its fit with interview method), designing the interview questions, interviewing, transcribing the interview data, data analysis, and verification. I will discuss all seven steps in regard to my study and what I did to prepare and execute my qualitative interviews.

Thematizing

The qualitative method was used because I was able to obtain intricate details about phenomena such as feelings, thought processes, and emotions that are difficult to

extract or learn about through other research methods (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I used the method of qualitative interviewing which is a kind of guided conversation in which I carefully listened so as to understand the meaning of what was being conveyed (Warren, 2001). In order to guide any interview, there is a delicate line between the types of questions that should be asked and when they should be asked in a qualitative interview. Therefore, interview question formation is discussed next in the designing section.

Designing the Interview Questions

Participants answered a variety of questions. The individual interviews focused on communication within the family system and uncertainties of the parent/child relationship with the parent who left the family due to a military leave or incarcerated leave (see Appendix A), and the significant other (i.e., a married and/or cohabiting partner) who was at home with the kids during the distal separation (see Appendix B). There were families that did not have a significant other who took care of the kids. In these cases, the caregivers such as the children's grandparents or other relatives/friends were interviewed. Additionally, Nolan's (2004) research on family relationships and adjustment to parental separation and divorce interviewed a target child per family which made it easier to compare across families. Therefore, this research tried to interview one child under the age of 18 per family (see Appendix C). After finishing the interviews, parents completed a demographic questionnaire (see Appendix D).

Every interview should go through a process of asking less sensitive questions first and end with more emotionally laden questions. Individuals are more likely to open up if the interview begins with less threatening questions. I used an interview guide that focused on my research questions. However, I listened carefully to incorporate probing

questions and follow-up questions after participants answered the questions (Warren, 2001).

The types of questions should be non-directive to begin, such as grand tour questions. These questions are used to understand how something transpires from the beginning to the end (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Additionally, a number of non-directive questions could be asked such as experience questions (i.e., ask for long distance experience) and timeline questions (i.e., participant is asked to recount a first experience or a turning point experience). Sensitive questions were at the end of the interview because I needed to take time to develop trust. In order to ask these questions, I needed to be thoroughly prepared as to how I obtained my participants, where I interviewed them, and how I recorded the interview.

Interviewing

Participants. All interviews were done individually and there were a total of 54 individual interviews conducted each last approximately 10-20 minutes for the children and 25-35 minutes for the parents. There were a total of 37 parents/caregivers and 17 children interviewed. The following two paragraphs will summarize the demographics of the military families and then the families with incarcerated parents (see Table 1).

The demographics for the military parents and families were as follows. The average distance was approximately 3400 miles away. The closest parent was about 500 miles away and the farthest distance for a parent was around 7000 miles away in Afghanistan. On average there were two children per family. The average age of the children interviewed was 11 with the oldest being 15 years old and the youngest child

Table 1

Demographics of Participants

FAMILY NAMES	Distance	Length of Separation per month	Number of Visits	Phone Contact per week	E-mail Contact per week	Letter per month
Military Fathers						
Drury Family	500	3	1	2	0	4
Bundee	6400	12	0	2	0	8
Rawling	7000	11	1	2	7	4
Hart	1500	15	2	5	2	4
Gentry	1500	15	2	2	2	1
Grant	6400	12	0	1	1	1
Keeley	1500	16	4	1	7	2
Military Mothers						
Johnson	900	6	1	14	0	2
Kirk	6400	3	0	3	7	12
Nixon	1500	16	2	8	7	1
Strathman	1500	15	2	3	1	1
Darcy	6400	4	0	1	0	1
Incarcerated Fathers						
Marks	200	60	20	1	0	8
Hallman	200	36	15	1	0	1
Enderly	100	18	3	2	0	1
Wayman	600	48	0	3/year	0	1
Summit	100	18	0	1	0	1
Babor	200	18	18	2	0	4
Kendrick	200	12	1	1	0	2
Incarcerated Mothers						
Frank	800	25	2	3	0	8
Crawley	400	36	0	9	0	3
Furle	120	39	0	3/year	0	2/year
Ardon	400	12	1	1/month	0	8

Table 1 (continued)

Demographics of Participants

FAMILY NAMES	# of Children	Age of Child Interviewed	Sex of Child Interviewed	Age of Parent Away	Age of Parent at home	Race	Income
Military Fathers							
Drury Family	2	n/a	n/a	47	43	w	81-100
Bundee	2	n/a	n/a	24	25	w	21-40
Rawling	2	13	male	30	34	w	41-60
Hart	2	n/a	n/a	22	20	w	21-40
Gentry	3	9	female	42	41	b	41-60
Grant	2	15 and 8	m and f	37	37	w	81-100
Keeley	3	n/a	n/a	32	29	w	21-40
Military Mothers							
Johnson	2	n/a	n/a	22	grandmother	w	21-40
Kirk	3	14	female	40	39	w	41-60
Nixon	4	8	female	35	33	w	41-60
Strathman	1	9	male	34	grandparents	w	1-20
Darcy	1	12	male	34	35	w	21-40
Incarcerated Fathers							
Marks	2	n/a	n/a	28	32	b	21-40
Hallman	2	n/a	n/a	50	50	b	1-20
Enderly	2	n/a	n/a	25	23	b	1-20
Wayman	4	12	female	36	39	b	21-40
Summit	3	10	male	29	30	b	21-40
Babor	2	9	M	25	25	b	1-20
Kendrick	4	7	female	27	26	w	1-20
Incarcerated Mothers							
Frank	3	14	female	37	caregiver	w	1-20
Crawley	6	25 and 20	male	44	47	b	61-80
Furle	2	12	male	50	sister	b	1-20
Ardon	2	17	female	45	grandparents	w	1-20

being 8 years old. There were four male and four female children interviewed. The average age of the military distal parent was 33 years old and the average age of the parent at home was 34. The ages of the two caregivers were not taken into account because they were the grandparents and ages were not given. Eleven Caucasian military families were interviewed and one African American military family was interviewed. The average income for military families was 33,000-55,000 per year.

The demographics for the incarcerated parents and families were as follows. The average distance was approximately 302 miles away from their families. The closest incarcerated parent was approximately 100 miles away and the farthest parent was about 800 miles away in another state. On average there were three children per family. The average age of the children interviewed was 13 years old. There were two adult brothers who were interviewed because they wanted to both be interviewed. The oldest was 25 and the other one was 20 and had been under 18 when his mother was incarcerated. The youngest child who was interviewed was 7 years old. There were four males and four female children interviewed. The average age of the distal incarcerated parent was 36 and the average age of the parents at home was 34. The ages of the three caregivers were not taken into account because their ages were not given. The most common race was African American. Eight African American families were interviewed and three Caucasian families were interviewed. The average income for incarcerated parents and their families was 12,000-31,000 dollars per year.

Respondents were eligible to participate in the study if they were involved in a distal parent/child relationship and/or were the caregiver who stayed home with the children. Once again, a distal parent/child relationship in this research was

conceptualized as those in a committed and interdependent relationship in which the parents and children perceived a situational constraint that limited their ability to be together on a regular and frequent basis.

All interviews were done individually and there were a total of 54 individual interviews conducted. There were a total of 37 parents/caregivers and 17 children interviewed. There were different combinations for each family that were interviewed such as the distal parent and other parent, the distal parent and child, the distal parent, other parent, and child, etc. (see Table 2). The children were interviewed because it was easier to assess the family system by getting different perspectives on the same topic. Additionally, I was then able to state what the children were feeling about the communication situations rather than hearing it from their parents.

Sampling Criteria: Important sampling criteria included the following: (a) One parent who was previously distal for more than two months from their families because of a military assignment/deployment or incarceration and were within two years of returning back into their family. Additionally, the children and/or parent/caregiver who stayed home with the children could also be interviewed along with the distal parent. (b) The family must have been intact in that they were committed and interdependent before, during, and after the separation. (c) The parents did not have to be married or have any certain sexual orientation. (d) The parents must have had a child who could be interviewed and was under the age of 18 and old enough (i.e., around the age of 10 or older) to communicate. If they had more than one child, the oldest child was asked to be interviewed. If the oldest did not want to be interviewed, the child who wanted to be

Table 2

Number and Combinations of Family Members Interviewed

FAMILY NAMES	54 People Interviewed	Parent Only	Parent & Child	1 Parent & 2 Children	2 Parents & 1 Child	2 Parents & 2 Children	Parent & Parent	Parent & Caregiver	Parent & child & Caregiver
Military Fathers									
Drury	1	■							
Bundee	2						■		
Rawling	3				■				
Hart	2						■		
Gentry	3				■				
Grant	4					■			
Keeley	2						■		
Military Mothers									
Johnson	2							■	
Kirk	2		■						
Nixon	3				■				
Strathman	2		■						
Darcy	2		■						
Incarcerated Fathers									
Marks	1	■							
Hallman	2						■		
Enderly	2						■		
Wayman	2		■						
Summit	3				■				
Babor	3				■				
Kendrick	3				■				
Incarcerated Mothers									
Frank	3								■
Crawley	3			■					
Furle	2		■						
Ardon	2		■						

interviewed was asked. And if more than one child wanted to be interviewed, they were given the opportunity to be interviewed. (e) If three individuals (i.e., distal parent, parent/caregiver at home, and children) could not be interviewed, the distal parent/child dyad could be interviewed or the parental dyad could be interviewed. For example, if the child was too young to be interviewed and/or could not communicate about the experience, both the parents or the distal parent and caregiver were interviewed.

Locating Participants. To obtain these individuals, a combination of snowball sampling and theoretical construct sampling was used. Snowball sampling is a technique used to contact people through referrals who share or know of others who experienced the same phenomena a researcher is investigating (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Research participants were solicited by contacting certain organizations and/or individuals I knew. Once the names and numbers were given to me, I called each participant and used a snowball script (see appendix G) so there was consistency in what I said when the participants were contacted.

Participants were then selected through theoretical construct sampling. This type of sampling uses important criteria to select participants in the study that is driven by the theory (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). In order to gain a complete picture of a family system and how the boundaries, roles, etc. were affected by the communication used during pre-separation, separation, and reentry of the parent into the household, there were necessary components that the family needed to have to qualify for the study.

Incarcerated individuals and their families were found by contacting the director of a large home detention program. The home detention organization is a large facility where felony convicts come out of prison and are confined to their homes when not

working. Interviews took place with those just coming out of prison and who were off the home detention program. Those recruited for this study successfully completed the home detention program and were not tied to corrections. The director was asked if there were parents within 2 years out of prison who I could contact. Three home detention case workers (i.e., those who worked at home detention and dealt with the parents and their families) contacted parents who had recently completed the home detention program and asked if they would like to participate in my study. I contacted those parents who agreed to be interviewed and told them about the study and asked if they would want to participate.

Military individuals were located by contacting those embedded in the military. I personally contacted one ROTC officer at the University of Missouri, Columbia who was a distal parent himself and he gave me names of other distal parents in the ROTC office. Additionally, the ROTC officer contacted the Colonel at a large military base who gave me contacts of distal parents at that base. I also had a contact in another state that had been deployed as a military reservist. He gave me names of other individuals who were a part of his squadron. After I was given a list of potential participants, I told them the purpose of my study and asked if they could be interviewed at a place comfortable for them.

Setting. Once the potential participants were found, they were contacted via the phone and/or e-mail to set up a time and a place to be interviewed. Interviews were conducted in person in a place that was convenient for the participants. All efforts were made to do the interview face-to-face; phone interviews were done only as a last resort. One incarcerated family and one military family were interviewed over the phone.

Reducing the threat for participants occurs even before the interview begins. The setting that is chosen can make or break an interview because it could possibly reduce or enhance the participant threat. A good interview would be in a setting that is comfortable for the respondent while a setting that places the interviewer in a more powerful position than the interviewee (e.g., my office) would be negative. The importance of setting is illustrated by Schwalbe and Wolkomir (2001) who claimed that men often see the interview as a threat to their masculine selves because they often feel they do not have control in an interview. Because of this, Schwalbe and Wolkomir asserted that the researcher needs to offer symbolic expressions of control such as letting them choose a time and place for the interview.

Those parents who agreed to be interviewed were contacted and told about the study and asked if they would participate. For the incarcerated parents and their families I asked if they could meet me at the local United Way building where there was a conference room donated to me for a week. The United Way building is a not-for-profit corporation that helps those in need and the conference room was donated by a church group that specifically helps offenders and their families. The building was used because it was the most neutral place I could find that was comfortable for both me and the participants. I wanted to find a place other than their homes because they had been incarcerated previously and I did not feel completely safe going to their homes alone just in case activities were still going on.

Six families showed up to the United Way building and not more than that because I did not provide an incentive (e.g., money) for them to come. Because some families did not show up to the United Way building, I had to contact additional potential

participants to be interviewed when I would be in that area a month later. Since I did not have access to the United Way building a second time, I had to go to their houses. I went to one house alone, two houses with a plain-clothed home detention officer who sat in another room during the interviews, and one house with my husband who sat in another room. I took the officer and my husband to three of the houses because the home detention office did not think it was completely safe for me to enter these houses alone due to past convictions. I introduced the officer and my husband as my chauffeur. One family was interviewed by phone because I could not go to their house due to a constriction of time that I had while in the city that was two states away from where I reside.

The majority of military families were interviewed in their homes. I offered everyone some setting suggestions to see if they felt comfortable with any of those. Most of them stated that they were comfortable with me going to their homes. Out of the twelve military families, eight families were interviewed in their homes. One family was interviewed at their local Burger King and two families were interviewed at the distal parent's offices. One military family was interviewed by phone because I could not travel there for monetary reasons.

Procedure. After the time and place were decided on the phone, I ended the phone conversation by asking them to bring any documents they had that were written to each other during the distal separation. Documents are important to qualitative researchers because they are the "paper trail" left in the wake of historical events and processes. The personal documents of individuals (e.g., letters, diaries, journals, notes, scrapbooks, and e-mails) can provide insights into the construction of personal beliefs, identities,

relationships, and communicative styles (Creswell, 1998). I asked the participants if they had documents saved from their distal experience. I asked for any personal documents written by the parents that incorporated their children (i.e., the parents wrote to each other about their children) that the distal parent wrote to the child, and that the child wrote to the distal parent. Because of the vast amount that some may have, I told them to bring up to 5 of their most important documents if they felt comfortable doing so. Even though I asked them on the phone to bring documents or to have documents ready for the interview, only three military families provided any documents. The rest of the families said they had some but they could not find them or did not want to share them.

Before the interview began, parents were handed the consent form to read and sign (see Appendix E) that gave consent to interview them as well as to interview their children. Additionally, when the child was interviewed, they were given an assent (see Appendix F) form that is easier to read but informs them of the study. Participants were informed (a) of the purpose of the study, (b) of the procedures involved, (c) that their participation was voluntary, (d) that the study was confidential, (e) that the interviews would be audio-taped, and (f) that they may choose to withdraw from the study at any time. The participants did not receive payment but were informed of the importance of this research. The participants were told that the interview would last between ½ to 1 ½ hours depending on how much they had to say. They were told that all names and identifying information would be changed to protect confidentiality. Additionally, they were asked if the interview could be audio taped. All participants who agreed were then verbally told that their names and other identifying information would

not be used when the tapes were transcribed. Additionally, they were informed that the tapes would be destroyed to further protect participants.

Transcribing

A tape recorder can be intrusive (Warren, 2001), but it is needed to get the true essence of what the person said. Additionally, Warren (2001) asserted that many participants have the perception that tape recorders mean negative things and many talk after a tape recorder is off. This episode occurred twice and I utilized the time immediately following the interview to write down what they said.

The data was transcribed verbatim and the transcriptions totaled 382 single-spaced pages. The names were changed for each family member as I transcribed and I made a list of family members interviewed with their pseudo names (see Table 3). In addition any identifying information was also left out of the transcriptions. I numbered the lines so it would be easier to analyze and I started the numbers over for each family. I transcribed each tape on my own because the process of transcribing is a great way to formulate ideas and begin to analyze data. After the transcription process, I followed three main steps for analyzing that are detailed in the following section.

Data Analysis

For the interviews, a thematic analysis was done by highlighting and color coding categories that emerged from the text. Lindlof and Taylor's (2002) suggested way to do an analysis through data reduction, data management, and conceptual development was used.

Analyzing does not occur once all the interviews are done. Because I view interviews more actively than the traditional way, different criteria apply. In traditional

Table 3

Pseudo Names of Military Families

1. Drury Family

Dan Drury = Father Away
Alison Drury = Mother/Wife
Hannah = Daughter, oldest
Sam = Son

3. Rawling Family

Tim = Father away
Julie = Mother/Wife
Joey = Son, oldest
Jonathan = Son

5. Gentry Family

George = Father away
Aisha = Mother/Wife
George II = Son, oldest
Nicki = Daughter
Myrna = Daughter, youngest

7. Keeley Family

Mark = Father away
Joanna = Mother/Wife
Julianne = Her biological daughter
Matt = His biological son
Maddy = His biological daughter

9. Kirk Family

Tanya = Mother away
Dave = Father/Husband
Emily = Daughter, oldest
Amanda = Daughter
Mark = Son, youngest

11. Strathman Family

Ann = Mother away
Ann's Parents = Caregivers
Cody = Son

2. Bundee Family

Steve = Father Away
Alison = Mother/Wife
Alexis = Daughter, oldest
Amber = Daughter

4. Hart Family

John = Father away
Joanna = Mother/Wife
Danielle = Daughter

6. Grant Family

Bob = Father away
Sheila = Mother/Wife
Neil = Son, oldest
Hailey = Daughter

8. Johnson Family

Kelly = Mother away
Barb = Kelly's mother
Caleb = Kelly's son

10. Nixon Family

Sally = Mother away
William = Father/Husband
Jackie = Her daughter, oldest
Jill = Her biological daughter
Jack = His biological son
Jenny = Her biological daughter

12. Debbie Darcy

Debbie = Mother away
Jason = Debbie's ex-husband
Matthew = son

Note. The italicized names were the participants interviewed.

Table 3 (continued)

Pseudo Names of Incarcerated Families

1. Andrew Marks

Andrew = Father away
Darla = Mother/Wife
Jackson = Son

3. Enderly Family

Derek = Father away
Megan = Mother/Wife
Derek Jr. = Son, oldest
Jordon = Youngest son

5. Summit Family

Karl = Father away
Jasmine = Mother/Girlfriend
Martin = Son

7. Kendrick Family

Joel = Father away
Janette = Mother/Wife away 1 time too
Angela = Daughter, oldest
Rachel = Daughter
Nathan = Her biological son
Anna = Daughter

9. Crawley Family

Ruth = mother away
Barry = Father/Husband
Blair = Oldest son
Philip = 2nd son
Manny = Son
Patrice = Daughter
Sabrina = Daughter, youngest

11. Ardon Family

Ashley = mother away
Julie = oldest daughter
Jeff = youngest boy

2. Hallman family

Anthony = Father away
Amy = Mother/Wife
Georgia = Her biological daughter
Vern = Her biological son

4. Wayman Family

Louis = Father away
Priscilla = Mother/Wife
Heather = Daughter, oldest
Nikki = Daughter

6. Babor Family

Adam = Father away
Kathleen = Mother/Wife
Leon = Son
Katrina = Daughter

8. Frank Family

Rachel = mother away
Sarah = Caregiver
Caitlin = Daughter, oldest
Carrie = Daughter
Damien = Son, youngest

10. Furle Family

Donna = Mother away
Her sister was his caregiver
Stephan = Son

Note. The italicized names were the participants interviewed.

interviewing, participants are vessels of information and I would be merely the one who asks questions. According to Holstein and Gubrium (2001) “both the interviewer and respondent continuously engage in coding experience. Active coding takes place and unfolds as an integral part of the interview process” (p. 57).

During the interviews, common themes emerged. Additionally, during the transcription process, certain themes that were relevant were highlighted. After the transcription process highlights and colors were used to help reduce the data. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), data are reduced by categories and codes that put the researcher in touch with only those parts of the material that count toward his or her claims.

Managing the data occurs by placing it into categories and codes. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) defined categorization as the “process of characterizing the meaning of a unit of data with respect to certain generic categories...and a category is a covering term for an array of general phenomena: concepts, constructs, themes and other types of ‘bins’ in which to put items that are similar” (p. 214). Categories emerged by examining the data in several sessions of close reading and found the incidents in the data that related to each other in such a way that they seem to belong to a category (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 215).

Codes are defined as the “linkages between the data and the categories posited by the research” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 216). To code, names, labels, and definitions were the link between the data and categories. Colors were used to identify labels that captured common features of the categories. In addition to the colors, a document was made of all the labels with the corresponding numbers from the transcripts that fit under

each label. By each number there was a summarized statement of what the participant said so the document was an easy reference that could be printed out and examine as well.

When interpretation took place, themes were put into theoretical context. Interpretation takes the reader from first order explanation (i.e., straight from the participant) to second order (i.e., the researcher's explanation). Therefore, each category or subcategory was explicated in detail. Additionally, the interpretation was brought back to literature. Bringing it back to literature helps with verification which is what will be described next.

Verification

Verification strives to answer the question: "How do we know that the qualitative study is believable, accurate, and right?" (Creswell, 1998). Creswell provided the following eight procedures that researchers can use to verify their work: Prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the field; triangulation (i.e., researchers can use multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories); peer review or debriefing that provides an external check of the research process; negative case analysis (i.e., the researcher refines working hypotheses as the inquiry advances in light of negative or disconfirming evidence); clarifying researcher bias (i.e., biases that are recognized from the outset of the study so the reader understands the researcher's position); member checks (i.e., the researcher asks participants if the data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions are accurate and credible); rich and thick description (i.e., this allows the reader to make transfer information to other settings); and external audits (i.e., allowing an external consultant who has no connection to the study to

examine whether or not the findings, interpretations, and conclusions are supported by the data).

Out of these eight verification procedures, Creswell indicated that qualitative researchers use at least two of them in any given study. This study exceeded this number by using four forms of verification: Checked my biases; triangulation; rich, thick description; and member checks.

First I checked my biases from the outset of the study and commented on my past experiences, biases, prejudices. For example, I too was in a distal relationship with my mother when I was 4 – 6 years of age and based on this experience, I have my own opinion as to what my mother and father should have done. The distance negatively affected my mother's goals as she was less than a year from finishing her degree, but quit school and moved back so she could be back with her children. This is my negative bias on distal parental relationships and I was careful to examine how this affected my work. For example, when one child cried during an interview, I felt sympathetic to his cause and realized that it was difficult for me to ask some questions because I had felt some of the same feelings he had when I was young.

Second, triangulation was used. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) posited that triangulation can occur through multiple sources, multiple methods, and multiple researchers. Triangulation in my research occurred by using multiple sources from one data gathering method (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) by interviewing both parents and children. By interviewing more than one person in each family, answers could be compared. Triangulation was attempted to be used in the form of using multiple methods by trying to obtain documents such as e-mails or letters they wrote to each other.

However, only three military families gave me documents so this type of triangulation was not utilized.

Third, rich, thick description was used when writing my report. Although using description in terms of building theory, Strauss and Corbin (1998) have the same idea when they asserted that people commonly describe objects, people, scenes, events, actions, emotions, moods, and aspirations in their everyday conversations. Description is needed to convey what was or is going on, what the setting looked like, and what the people involved were doing, and so on. I have a detailed description of the participants by using long quotes. Therefore, the rich, thick description will enable readers to transfer information to other settings because of shared characteristics (Creswell, 1998).

Finally, external standard of verification (Creswell, 1998) was used by utilizing member checking in which participants were asked to assess how well the themes captured their views of my findings (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Since themes are constantly being formed throughout the study, I asked individuals if their experiences related to participants interviewed before them.

Additionally, participants who agreed to do member checking were given an opportunity to verify and comment on themes. I asked everyone before the initial interviews began if I could contact them a second time regarding the findings. Everyone agreed so I contacted three military parents (George Gentry, Mark Keeley, and Tanya Kirk) and three incarcerated parents (Louis Wayman, Karl Summit, and Ruth Crawley). By phone, I provided a summary of the major themes and asked the participants to verify if they thought the themes were accurate to their perceptions. Before asking questions, I explained again what a member check was and asked if they had any questions. Then I

asked if I could record the phone conversation and they all agreed. The verification lasted approximately 5 to 10 minutes per phone call. After the phone conversations, I transcribed each conversation and each transcription was one to two single spaced pages. They all agreed that the themes were accurate to their perceptions and this provided evidence suggesting that my interpretation was appropriate.

CHAPTER FOUR: Results

Research Question One

When military and incarcerated parents leave their families, change occurs. Family systems often strive for predictability and stability and reassignment of roles and renegotiation of boundaries often occur *after* a parent has physically separated from the family (Drummet et al., 2003). However, researchers have not yet examined if communication before can help balance the equilibrium between stability and change. Because families strive for some predictability, talking to children about what could be a separation in the future could prepare them for the leave and the return of their distal parents. Therefore, the first research question asked how parents and children communicate before the parent becomes distal.

This study found that those in the military who had not previously experienced a distal separation did not communicate about the distal separation before the parent left. Five out of the twelve military parents were individuals who had experienced a prior deployment and discussed the importance of talking to their kids prior to their departure. Those military members who had not experienced a prior separation did not discuss the leave with their children. In general, all eleven incarcerated families did not discuss the leave with their children. Incarcerated families knew ahead of time that there may be a parental departure, similar to military families. However, military families' knowledge came from a pending war while knowledge from the families of incarcerated parents came from the fact that the parent had a warrant out for their arrest or the parent was living on the streets and/or doing drugs in front of their families. Underlying the

separations of both the incarcerated and military distal separations were uncertainties that needed to be reduced by communication.

The parents and children in this study communicated very little about the actual parental absence. These military and incarcerated families already had some idea that change would occur in the future but did not want to address the possibility that a parent may be leaving in the future. First, military families had some idea that a parent would be leaving because of the September 11th attacks and the fact that the United States was fighting in a war. There was always the possibility that the parent would be leaving, but when and where was an uncertainty that some families did not want to discuss until they received their orders. In a similar sense, but still much different, families with incarcerated parents knew beforehand that their parents were involved in illegal activities, and addressing the issue of a parent leaving was an uncertainty that they did not want or could not discuss. This finding is consistent with the uncertainty management (Brashers et al., 2000) because they did not seek information to reduce their uncertainty.

Expectancy Violation

Whether they did communicate or did not communicate about the absence, these families had expectations that were or were not violated while the parent was away. Expectancies are framing devices that help both to characterize and structure interpersonal interactions and can affect satisfaction and emotions in relationships (Burgoon, 1993). Communication expectancies signify an enduring pattern of anticipated behavior and that expectation is violated when the behavior differs from what is typical or expected (Burgoon, 1993). For example, if a parent communicates about the absence prior to leaving and said they would talk all the time and then found that they could not

call while in prison because of money, expectations could be violated and emotions could be more negative. On the opposite spectrum, if a parent does not communicate about the absence beforehand and they end up calling all the time, expectations could still be violated but in a positive manner because they were not expecting to hear from the parent as much.

Overall, it was found that the more a parent communicated about the absence prior to leaving, the less negative the experience for the kids and the family as a whole. There are multiple sources that expectations can come from. One of those sources is just assumptions that people make. When there is no communication, all people have for expectations is their assumptions, and any time their assumptions are more positive than what happens, they are going to be disappointed. It seems that communication before the separation can help people set realistic expectations, so there is less chance of those expectations not being met.

The following discussion about pre-separation communication will be broken down into three sections. The first section provides examples of parents who *did not* discuss the distal separation with their children. The second section provides examples of parents who *did* discuss their distal separation and the examples illustrate how the ability to adapt to change is reliant on the experience of each family. This section illustrates how experienced (i.e., those who were career military members or who had experienced a deployment prior to the current one) military members were able to apply their past experience to know what to say to their children. In addition, the third section provides examples from the experienced military family members to illustrate how planning for absence helped their families. Planning for the absence is labeled “transition planning”

because the families' planning beforehand hinged on minimizing change for their children during the transition phase.

No Communication about Parental Absence

The ideas discussed in this section are hinged on the concept that there was little to no communication before the parent left even though both the incarcerated and military parents knew or had an idea that they would be leaving. Brashers et al. (2000) asserted in their theory of uncertainty management that one of the ways that individuals can manage uncertainty (and thus the emotional responses to it) is by managing interaction (e.g., by choosing to seek information or to avoid information). Many of these participants managed their uncertainty by avoiding information before the parent departed.

First, families with incarcerated parents knew beforehand that their parents were involved in illegal activities, and addressing the issue of a parent leaving was an uncertainty that they did not want to talk about. Some of the children already felt a loss before the parents were in prison because their parents were predominately living outside their home doing illegal activities. Eight out of the eleven incarcerated families mentioned how the parent was doing illegal activities beforehand and the parent was really not there for the family. It was not until the parent went into prison that they realized the value of family and began to actually communicate with their significant others and their children. When asked how he told his children before he left, Anthony Hallman discussed that he explained to his children *after* he was in prison.

Anthony: Uh, before I left, they knew anyway because of my um, actions. They knew that. Um, as far as talking with them, we didn't really talk until I was

incarcerated. Until I was locked up downtown. Um, actually me and wife, we were, our relationship was kind of rocky at that time before I had gotten arrested. But after I was arrested, we talked and we talked about a lot of things. And it worked, I mean we worked on our relationship from me being on the inside and I was able to sit. Well, she could keep me in one spot where we could talk. You know.

Anthony Hallman admitted that he and his wife and their children did not communicate until he was in prison. Anthony stated that it was not until he was able to stay in one place that he and his family were able to communicate and that symbolizes the general attitude of the parents who went to prison. Before they were incarcerated, the parents participated in illegal activities that separated them from their family. In other words, they were doing drugs and staying away for days at a time. Similarly in the following excerpt, Karl Summit and his girlfriend, Jasmine both separately discussed how their communication began after he was in prison.

Interviewer: And how did you and Karl communicate about the leave to your children?

Jasmine: Um, when he first got locked up, there really wasn't too much communicating and once he got locked up and he started calling and writing me and we started getting back closer together. And then he started calling talking to the kids, writing letters, sending them birthday cards. He got more close to us once he got locked back up...Before he got locked up, we were close but he was more into his friends at the time. So he'd rather be with his friends and run the

streets than spend time with me and his kids. Then when he got locked up, I guess he figured his friends ain't going to be there for him like me and the kids would. Jasmine talked about how her boyfriend ran the streets and did not really communicate before he was locked up. She discussed that it was not until Karl was locked up that he began communicating with his family. From the other side of the perspective, Karl's story matches Jasmine's as he talked about how he did not talk to his family before he left, even though he knew he was leaving.

Interviewer: Okay and did you talk to your kids about it before you left?

Karl: No because I actually had a warrant. My girlfriend knew about it, but the kids didn't. Um, I was staying with her for a little bit at her apartment.

Interviewer: Were you at separate apartments?

Karl: I was staying at my mom's. But now we are staying together. I was back and forth to my mom's and running the streets. And she [girlfriend] didn't approve of that and I just decided I would stay there. And uh, it took me to go to prison to realize how important my family was to me. It took me to do time to really figure out what my family means to me. Talking to my kids. I didn't talk to them before I left. I called about, the last four months before I was going to get out, I think I called 300 times.

It took Karl Summit going to prison to realize that he needed to start communicating with his family. In fact, he started communicating with his kids so much he said the last four months he called 300 times. The number of 300 was probably an exaggeration but it illustrates that he began calling them many times while in prison. Calling his family so much just before he was out of prison may have illustrated an uncertainty that Karl felt

about not knowing whether or not he had a home to go to because of how he left. Or calling multiple times could have illustrated that he felt closer to his family and he was trying to prove to them that he could communicate. Whatever the case, Karl was obviously trying to reconnect with his family while in prison. Unlike the military families that were trying to *remain* close once the parent departed, it appears that all eleven families with incarcerated parents were attempting to become close once the parent was incarcerated.

Second, the military families also felt an uncertainty about a pending parental leave but the difference in their situation is that the military parents could have communicated if they had known what to communicate because they were actually home with the kids before they departed rather than participating in illegal activities. After the war began, military families had some idea that their parent/s might leave at some point, but when and where was an uncertainty. In fact, eight out of the twelve military families mentioned that they already had some idea that the parent would eventually leave because of the war. In the following excerpt Sally and William Nixon talked about how they found out Sally was being deployed and how she communicated that to William and their four children.

Interviewer: Okay, and how did she tell you that she was leaving. How did she tell the family, or how did you find out?

William: Well, being, we weren't 100% sure she was going to go, but we knew because of the war and her unit got put on alert. And basically when she found out, she told me instantly. Uh, I'm not sure if she waited. I think we told the kids

right away too. Because it was, it wasn't like you're leaving in a month, you're like leaving in a couple weeks.

William discussed only knowing positively for a couple of weeks that his wife was being deployed and how hard it was to prepare because they had such little time. But he stated that they did not communicate even when her unit got put on alert because they were not positive she was going to go. Instead of verbally communicating which would have created additional uncertainties (Kramer et al., 2004) this family avoided talking about what could be a departure in the near future. Information avoidance is a method for managing uncertainty because it allows individuals not to confront potentially distressing knowledge or allows retreat from information that tends to be overwhelming (Brashers et al., 2000). Sally also talked about knowing for a longer period of time but her unit was uncertain about when they were leaving and what to do and she did not know what to say to her family.

Interviewer: Did you go over all that information with them before you left or was that um, did you have an opportunity?

Sally: Um actually we [her unit] knew we were leaving all along, I mean we knew we were leaving for while since like probably December that we were going somewhere, but we just didn't know where or when, you know, but we knew it was going to happen. So I mean like really there's a lot of things you don't know what to discuss about. Until I mean you're already gone and then my husband will call and ask questions you know ask me questions about different situations. You know like, I don't even know what to.

Sally Nixon discussed not knowing what to talk about to her family and it was not until she was gone that the questions from her family started. Sally was deployed for a year and a half and she left her husband with three of her daughters from a previous marriage and his son. The family as a whole had an extremely difficult time while Sally was away for a year and a half.

Managing uncertainty may have been one reason for topic avoidance, but another reason may have been because they simply did not know what to discuss due to little or no previous experience with deployments. Not knowing what will happen in the future is an uncertainty that these military families discussed. Military parents were often sent to training camps periodically which gave them some signal that they were going to go sometime in the future. However, the military did not tell them why they were going to the training camps and what they were preparing for and for those who had never been deployed, they may be inexperienced in determining what each training camp is for. Additionally, four military parents from different units discussed how rumors were spread among the unit about when and where they were leaving which also adds to the uncertainty because they did not know if the talk about the leave was true so they did not want to discuss it with their families. For the inexperienced military parents who had never been on a deployment, it was often difficult to determine what to make of the rumors or all the training camps because they did not officially know when and where they were going until they get their orders. However, there were some experienced families who had dealt with a deployment once before and who had talked about how they communicated about the absence because they had been through it before.

Communication about the Parental Absence

Those participants who had been in the military who had been on prior deployments or who were career military members talked about how experience helps with knowing what to say and how to act before a parent leaves. Military members that had been through an absence before because they already deployed as a reservist or as a career military member expressed certain ways of communicating with children that they learned from past experiences. Their experience with past absences provides unique insight to any family who would be experiencing a parental absence for the first time.

The following example is from a reservist who has been absent twice and learned his lesson from his failed marriage due to his first absence. The first time he was absent, Mark Keeley and his wife separated soon after he returned home and the second time, he did things much different to help maintain relationships with his kids from his first marriage and his second wife and stepdaughter. In the following excerpts, Mark Keeley discussed the communication he had with his family the first time he left compared to the second time he left.

Interviewer: Did you um, like did you communicate beforehand before you were gone the first time?

Mark: Very little. We didn't talk much.

Interviewer: Okay. So did you have plans?

Mark: No

Interviewer: And this time, how did you talk to about leaving to all your children about leaving before you left?

Mark: Just no bullshit. Straight out. You know in the army this is what happens...

One on one, you know, “this is what I do, this is where I’m going, this is how long I’m going to be gone, this is how I plan to talk to you while I’m gone”

Interviewer: Oh, so you laid it all out?

Mark: Mm hmm. I didn’t hold anything back. I told her that, well when I first was getting ready to leave, I told her [daughter] that I was probably going to Iraq and wouldn’t be able to talk to her much. The time that we would have would be very limited. Uh, but there would be a place that she could write to get letters to me and where I could send them home and you know. I told her how we can communicate. I told her the expectations I had for her while I was gone. You know since I’m gone, I need this and this done. “You know, I need you and your mom to be strong because I’m not here if there’s something that needs to be dealt with, you need to let me know so I can help as much as I can.”

Interviewer: Right. Were you able to talk to your other kids like that?

Mark: Same way.

There was an obvious difference between the first time and second time Mark was absent from his family. The first time, he did not communicate and lay out expectations for his family on how they were going to communicate which was unlike the second time he was gone. Although Mark’s family has not and probably will not experience more than two deployments because he is a reservist and they usually go on one or two assignments, he learned from the first one that he needed to communicate thoroughly before he left to help the absence go more smoothly.

Transition Planning

Underlying the preparation that families face before a parent leaves is the idea that without proper training, a family will never know what to expect when a parent leaves for the first time. However, when a parent leaves multiple times, uncertainty is reduced because they know what to expect. Because uncertainty is reduced, they are able to balance the equilibrium between change and stability easier because there is not as much fear of the unknown. Specifically, transition planning helps to minimize the effects of change for the children because it helps balance the equilibrium by providing children with some guidelines, creative, and consistent communication that bring stability back into their lives.

An example illustrating that experience helps with pre-separation communication came from Tanya Kirk, a career military member. Tanya Kirk and her family have experienced many parental absences because both Tanya and her husband have made careers out of being in the military. Because of their experience, Tanya knew when the September 11th attacks happened that she or her husband would probably be deployed sometime in the future and they started preparing their family for it soon after the attacks. This is unlike the other military reservists who had never been on a deployment before and did not know that it helps to communicate about the leave before it actually happens. In the following excerpt, Tanya discussed the time period before she left.

Interviewer: You sound like you were a successful family. What made your family successful?

Tanya: The kids knew what was going to happen. We told them, and my parents knew. I mean everyone in the family knew that if something should happen and if

one of us should go, it's like there are always options. You know, because I grew up in a military family and my dad went, 'cuz he went remote which was over to Asia three times without us. So it's like I knew what was going to happen.

Interviewer: That's cool. Uh, if you could give advice for any other parent going through this, what would you say? To a parent going away or a parent at home?

Tanya: Um, just well, let's see, I mean, just basically sit down and explain to the kids what's going to happen, where you are going to be, vicinity I guess you could say. Um, and I guess just make sure 'cuz like my husband and I since we're both military, we have to have um, like what they call a family care package in case both of us get deployed.

Interviewer: Okay

Tanya: Um, like whose going to take the kids for a short term, which would be the neighbors, until my mom and dad comes back here to pick them up. Unless of course they're in school and I already told my parents, "no you're not taking them out of school to take them down to [city]"

Tanya expressed how back up plans helps her family make transitions go more smoothly. One major concept underlying the communication during pre-separation, separation, and reunion is to minimize the effects of change for children. Pre-separation communication about the absence could help a child manage uncertainties and deal with the ambiguous loss of a parental absence, such as the plans Tanya's family put forth.

When pre-separation plans are not communicated, a child may have increased uncertainties and that can make it even more difficult for the child. Even though Ann Strathman planned for her son to live with his grandparents, her example illustrates that

plans sometimes fall through once the parent has left. However, it is important to recognize that the following example provides a good illustration of how unnecessary changes can negatively affect children. Circumstances out of Ann's control sent her son to four different schools during her absence. However, what is important is to examine the effect that the changes had on her son. Ann Strathman planned for her son to live with her parents but that meant he would have to change school districts. But then Cody had to switch to a totally different school mid-semester when his grandparents got divorced because his grandma moved and it was in another district. Then he had to change back to the old school when his grandma moved back in with her husband. Finally, when his mother came home, Cody had to go back to the original school. When walking in to the interview the mother claimed that her son was crying all night because he was afraid of being interviewed due to the fact that he did not want to remember all the bad memories. To illustrate how much the change affected him, the following excerpt shows that Cody began crying as soon as the interview began and he instantly talked about how he had to change schools:

Interviewer: Now Cody, can you tell me about yourself?

Cody: Well

Interviewer: Like how old you are.

Cody: I'm ten years old and I had to go to a lot of schools and um, [long pause – starting to cry] and I went to my grandma and grandpa's [pause] because my mom had to go overseas and um, uh, [crying]

The interview had to stop and start because Cody, currently ten years old periodically cried throughout the interview when he talked about his mom being gone when he was

eight and the changes that he went through. Cody's example illustrates how so much unplanned change affected him but it also shows that although Cody's mother planned for possible changes, it was out of her control with what occurred once she left. So although planning can help as shown with the following example, there is no guarantee because things may change once the parent has departed.

The following example illustrates how much transition planning and reducing the possibility of change had a positive effect on Kelly Johnson's son. Kelly Johnson, a single military mother moved into her mother's house two months before her leave because that is where Kelly's son would be living while she was gone. In the following excerpt, Kelly's mother, Barb expressed how her daughter and grandson moved into her house and it helped with his transition:

Barb: The thing is, she moved in with me when she knew she was going. She moved back in. Like in May, she thought she was going to go in June, in June until August. But she moved in even though she had two months worth of rent and she had to continue to pay. She moved in with us. And so he was, you know we knew pretty well what to do. You know, not that I didn't see him all the time anyway because we lived fairly close and I watched him a lot while she worked some odd job stuff. And uh, I actually think he did better uh, after she moved back in because her schedule and stuff was so weird before that I don't think he did well with all the changes and stuff. And I think he mellowed out when he got into a more routine.

Kelly Johnson tried to minimize the change in her son's transition by moving into the house he would be living in while his mother was away two months prior to her leave.

Being explicit about expectations and how much each person will be writing, calling, etc, will ease a child's uncertainties about whether or not their parent has abandoned them.

The parents or caregivers that took care of the kids were interviewed as well because they have a stake in the child's happiness while the other parent is away. If the parent at home has reduced stress, most likely the kid will too. This research found that if guidelines were given beforehand to other parent, anxiety was reduced. Anxiety was reduced especially if guidelines were given to a parent who took on a totally new role, such as paying the bills, doing additional housework, taking the kids places, etc. For example, in the following excerpt, Tim Rawling discusses how he put a book together for his wife to follow before he left.

Tim: For the most part, um, I made, I tried to put everything that I knew as far as passwords and stuff on the computer and accounts and phone numbers for different billing companies in case there's a problem. And uh, that was, that was probably one of the things that I was worried about, just making sure that she could take over wherever I left off, as far as that went.

Interviewer: Did you go over it with her?

Tim: Yeah, I sat down with her and went over it but I made it real simple as far as uh, I made a book of numbers to the names of people that I work with on a daily basis and I made a list of when the bills are generally due and who I pay them to and how I pay them. It was pretty, it was pretty simple. I mean, anybody could probably open it up and really follow it.

By setting out guidelines on how to pay the bills, where and when to take the kids places, etc, these families were able to help reduce uncertainties. A good example from the Frank

family illustrates what happens when parents do not actively prepare for the changes. Rachel Frank was an incarcerated mother who did not have a significant other to take care of her three children and her children ended up living in different places. In the following excerpt, Rachel discusses all the changes her children, Caitlin, Carrie, and Damien went through while she was in prison. However, the caregiver, Sarah, illustrated in her interview that Rachel planned poorly which may be a reason why Rachel's children went through so many changes. First, Rachel talked about the changes her children endured:

Rachel: Um, well, Caitlin and Carrie lived with Angela [aunt] at first and then Carrie moved out and moved in with the lady that Damien was living with. And she was an older lady that I've known for years. And she was a licensed foster parent and you know, she had experience with kids with disabilities. But I never [thought] that when I left, she was going to treat him wrong, you know, started treating him bad and calling him a retard and calling him bad names and stuff like that. And it threw him into a total rage that he's never, I don't think he's ever felt that way before and he didn't know how to you know channel his anger. And he just like you know pretty much flipped out and she had him sent to [disciplinary organization] a couple of times, one time in handcuffs. And you know and he's just not even that type of a kid period.

Rachel talked about how her children went through so many changes. She then went on to talk about how her son then moved in with his father who is never around but is a better alternative than the foster parent and Carrie moved in with Rachel's friend

from high school. According to Sarah, the aunt and caregiver of Caitlin, Rachel could have prevented all these changes if she would have prepared better.

Interviewer: Being the parent at home, would you have wanted anything different or done anything different?

Sarah: Um, I think if it had to be anything, I think it would be I think her planning, when she knew that her date was, she did a lot of stuff like last minute, like the weekend before that Monday. I thought she should have done things differently as far as planning and getting stuff in order so you're not, okay I got to wait for her to call back in order to get this paperwork filled out you know stuff like that. I think she could have made it a lot easier for us and you know took on that responsibility...So that'd probably be it. I think her last minute stuff, her planning should have been a lot different.

Even if incarcerated parents do actively spend time with their children, it does not necessarily mean they will want to face the departure and work hard to get everything in order. For example, Rachel Frank had a warrant out for her arrest and she had time before she turned herself in. Although Rachel did not mention how planning beforehand could have helped with her kid's transitions, the caregiver, Sarah did mention it. According to Sarah, Rachel had time to get everything straight, which would have made it much easier on the kids.

Minimizing change can have a positive affect on children because it helps to balance the equilibrium between change and stability. The following is an example of an incarcerated mother who did not have a place to put her daughter. However, her son had his father's place to go because her daughter had a different father than her son.

Interestingly, there was an obvious difference in their behaviors and their outcome in terms of how well they adjusted to their mother's absence. In the following excerpt, Ashley Ardon discusses how her nine year old son always had his own room at his father's house while her fifteen year old daughter was estranged from her father.

Interviewer: Were there any discipline problems uh when you left? Any more than when you left than before?

Ashley: For Julie yeah, for Jeff no. Jeff adapted. Because he already had a bedroom over there at his dads because he went regularly. His dad has always been a part of his life. Him no.

When Ashley was incarcerated her daughter did not have a place to go and she went to a youth center until her grandparents took her in. It was not until her daughter moved in with her grandparents that her grades started rising and her attitude toward her mother began to change because she was finally receiving a sense of stability. Ashley stated that she thought her son adapted well because he had already been going to his father's house for some time.

Minimizing change can also occur with creative and consistent communication. This research supports the idea that children take the news of a parental absence differently based upon their age. The parents with kids generally under the age of eight stated that their kids did not understand the concept of time. For example, when parents stated that they were going to be "gone for a long time," the kids would think that their parents would be back in an hour. Laying out expectations will help children. Saying they will be home "soon" is too ambiguous for children and especially younger children who have no concept of time. Parents need to make the time period concrete for children

to show them when the parent will be home. Tim Rawling stated the following about his six year old boy:

Tim: So it was difficult explaining to him where Daddy was going, what I'd been doing. And so on and so forth. So he acted like he understood, but he didn't understand.

Interviewer: Did you explain to him before you left the first time?

Tim: I explained to him the best I could that I would be gone for a while but his big thing was well, he'll be back tomorrow. He couldn't understand time.

Interviewer: Right.

Tim: You know, I would explain to him, "look it's going to be a lot of days" and every time I talked to him on the phone I tried to explain to him some sort of landmark that uh, major event. Okay, if 4th of July is coming, then Daddy is going to be gone for 2 more weeks or 4 more months or something.

Interviewer: Oh.

Tim: And he sounded like he understood. And the older one he did understand but the younger one he was a little more difficult because I'd call him again and talk to him and he'd be, "4th of July is here now, so I don't understand it, is it after the next day or after the next one?" So it was more difficult with the younger one than the older one.

Tim Rawling discussed how his six year old son had no concept of time. So throughout his leave, Tim tried to think of a landmark that his son could relate to and tell his son that he would be home after that time. Then once that date came, Tim would provide another landmark that his son could look forward to until he actually came home.

This research illustrates the need to have some feeling of balance when a parent leaves the family. Families have to negotiate a balanced equilibrium or a balance between change and stability. Setting guidelines and having a structure like how to communicate and where the children will live are ways parents can help bring stability back into their children's lives amidst the sea of change that occurs with the departure. However, even if families set guidelines before the leave, they still have to communicate with the distal parent once they have departed. Therefore, the next section focuses on maintenance behaviors and the emotional climate of the participants.

Research Question Two

The second research question asked what maintenance strategies are used by parents and children in parent/child distal relationships. All the participants seemed to focus their attention on the communication that was used while the parent was away which illustrates the degree of importance they placed on this phase of communication interaction (i.e., the time period the parent was away). Communication helped families reduce and manage their uncertainties and helped families maintain their relationships.

In this section, there will first be a discussion about how these families maintained their relationships. There will be a break down of each major maintenance technique used, specifically phone calls, postal mail, alternative forms of communication, and visits. Second, this section will discuss how these families managed their emotional climate. Specifically, to manage closeness, these participants used positivity, assurances, and cognitive processes characterizing association and to manage distance, the participants used cognitive dissociation, disengagement, and avoidance.

Balancing the Equilibrium Between Closeness and Distance

Besides being experienced with the distal separation and using transition planning, there was not too much else that these families stated could help balance the equilibrium and prepare them for their distal separation. Even if the family communicates about the transition before the separation, there is no guarantee that they will not feel a loss when their family changes from what they have always known. As stated in the review of literature, Golish and Dial (2002) claimed that there are no institutionalized proscriptions for how children should grieve the loss of a parent who is still alive but seemingly absent because they are not physically around. If parents could not minimize the effects of change before the separation, there were ways to communicate with their children while away that helped bring stability into their relationships with using phone connection, e-mail, postal mail, etc. Underlying most of this section between maintenance and emotional climate is the idea that families had to balance their equilibrium between closeness and distance in order to maintain their relationships.

Perhaps the most important contribution to this research was the finding that these military and incarcerated parents and their children maintained their relationships and reduced and/or managed their uncertainties by managing the emotional climate (i.e., managing the closeness and distance of their relationship). Techniques for closeness and distance have been found in research for relational partners (e.g., Hess, 2002; Hess, Daulton, & Hudson, 2004) and many of the same techniques were used maintain the existence of these parent/child distal relationships. Before actually talking about the emotional climate, there is first a discussion about maintenance behaviors.

Maintenance Behaviors

Even though maintenance behaviors were primarily used to reduce uncertainty, it was evident that uncertainties could not be totally reduced. Oftentimes these maintenance behaviors (e.g., phone calls, visits, etc.) created additional uncertainties that needed to be managed. Overall, even though these maintenance behaviors were seen to cause additional uncertainties, they were seen as a benefit to these relationships.

In order of usage, military parents and their children communicated by phone, e-mails/instant messenger, letter/cards/pictures/drawings, gifts, alternative ways to communicate (i.e., videoconferencing, Webcam, etc), and visits. Incarcerated parents and children communicated by letters/cards/pictures/drawings first and foremost, and then phone calls, sending gifts, and then visits. However those in prison did not have access to the Internet so they could not use e-mail or instant messenger.

Phone. Both military and incarcerated individuals had a set limit of time to use for phone calls. Phone calls were difficult for incarcerated parents because they tended to be from lower income families and could not afford the collect calls from prison. Phone calls were expensive, so on average the incarcerated families spoke two times a week. There were two incarcerated families that spoke much less than that on the phone with an average of three times per year. Military families spoke four times per week on average with two military mothers speaking the most out of anyone with one speaking on the phone fourteen times per week and the other eight times per week. All families claimed that phone calls were used during the parental absence and they were a way to maintain relationships.

Ironically, even though phone calls were used by every family as a way to maintain their relationships, phone calls sometimes caused additional uncertainties on family members that needed to be managed. If the phone calls were not set, family members felt like they had to constantly wait for that next phone call. They felt limited in what they could do because whatever activity they did, it had to be by the phone. In the following example, Aisha Gentry spoke of the difficulty with having to wait around for her husband's call when he was deployed.

Interviewer: Okay, if you were the parent away, would you have maintained the relationship any differently than he did?

Aisha: He said he had to go a long distance at first to try to e-mail and then the phone was limited, you know, they only gave him I think a 15 minute call once a week or every two weeks. And then, you'd never know when they'd call so I didn't know to be here or not because I had to do things, take care of this house, rental property. You know grocery store, stuff like that.

Aisha Gentry discussed how difficult it was to wait around for her husband's call because sometimes she "had to do things." Similarly, Tim Rawling's wife, Julie carried a cell phone just in case her husband would call. Julie felt he would always call at the most inconvenient time like if she were at Wal-Mart shopping and that made it difficult for her.

Julie: It seemed like he always called at the most inconvenient time. Like we were shopping at Wal-Mart.

Interviewer: Oh no [laugh].

Julie: [laugh] And they'd get mad at you because um, they either can't hear you or I don't know, or they'd think you're not paying attention or whatever you know?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Julie: Yeah, but Pam, my sister in law whose husband is deployed, and I have gone through a lot of the same things. As far as you know, the big thing is you know they're standing in line forever to use the phone. And when, well, I, well most, about 99% of the time I was standing by the phone to answer it. But uh, not being there, or not being able to hear after you know, waiting so long. You know, we're as excited to hear their voice as they are to hear ours. And it's out of our control when you know, we're having to be at Wal-Mart you know [laugh].

Julie stated how difficult it was when her husband would call at the most inconvenient time. She claimed that she waited by the phone 99% of the time, and if she was doing something else, he would get upset. From the other side of the perspective, Tim, her husband also talked about this issue. It was often difficult for the distal parent because they would wonder what was going on if their families were not answering and they had to manage that additional uncertainty. All but four military parents interviewed talked about how they only had two fifteen minute phone calls each week but they were able to find ways to call more than twice or for longer periods of time. Tim was on the topic of explaining how his unit was able to call more than twice per week when he began talking about how he would call right back when there were unresolved issues or when he could not get a hold of his wife. In the following excerpt, Tim claimed that he had a difficult time when he could not get in contact with his family:

Tim: But there was a few times where I had to get right back on the phone because something, something was going on at home and it, it wasn't going to wait and I'll take the punishment for doing an extra call or two, so.

Interviewer: Right. What kinds of things would you uh, get back on the phone about?

Tim: Um, well, she'd be, either myself or my wife would be upset about probably something insignificant that at the time if I was here it would be extremely insignificant, but I really can't recall. Mostly separation probably, you know the insecurity of not knowing what each other's doing probably um, not being able to sit down and just talk about each other's day. Uh, the events during the day. Um, if I would call my wife and for some reason I wouldn't be able to get a hold of her, you know being that far away.

Interviewer: Oh yeah.

Tim: Millions of things going through your mind. Like did something happen, is something wrong, uh, why can't I get a hold of my family and that was by far the worst uh out of anything was not being able to get in touch.

Tim's statement that not being able to get in touch was "by far the worst out of anything" was a strong statement. However, the statements made by Aisha Gentry and Julie and Tim Rawling illustrates that as important as phone calls are for families, they also can also additional uncertainties for the families at home and for the distal parent. The families at home feel like they have to constantly wait on a phone call while the parent away feels extremely stressed with "millions of things" going through their minds if their families do not answer their call.

What may be a solution to all of these problems are routine phone calls that establish consistency and reduce the chance of the unknown occurring. Even though some military parents are not able to call because their camp is in the process of setting

up or they are leaving for a few weeks for a mission, they will eventually have their camp set up and be back from their mission that they could routinely call after that. In the following example, Kathleen Babor talked about how her husband who was incarcerated called once or twice a week because of the expense. In order to talk to his son more, he called his son's grandma who accepted his calls when his son was over there. However, at the end of the excerpt, she claimed that her husband called her house at set times and how that really helped.

Interviewer: How many times did you talk to him on the phone?

Kathleen: Um, I know it wasn't that much because the bill was high. I want to say like either once or twice a week I think we talked.

Interviewer: Okay and talking to, how many times did he talk to your son?

Kathleen: Um, he talked to him more because he used to call him over at my mom's house. So he would call over there to my mom's house and talk to him but I'd be at work. And she accepted more calls than me.

Interviewer: Really? How many calls approximately did you not accept?

Kathleen: Oh every time he called I accept, but I worked first shift and then I had a part time job to make ends meet so I basically was never at home.

Interviewer: Okay.

Kathleen: So we had like set times for him to call. And I always was there. The set times really helped.

Kathleen's statement that set times really helped is characteristic of the incarcerated family and military family statements about routine calls. If the phone calls were routine, the family would not feel they are waiting for a phone call to come any minute and the

parent away would not feel neglected because their family would be answering the phone if it was routine. In addition, routine phone calls give children something to look forward to, like Kathleen's son who talked to his dad routinely at his grandmother's house.

Another difficulty with phone calls resulted from children not being old enough to talk on the phone. However, one unique way to communicate to young children came from Kelly Johnson. Her son was almost two when she left and he was too young to have a complete conversation. Therefore, she "read him a book" over the phone by doing the following:

Kelly: When I was gone for 4 months, I would talk to him on the phone but he didn't understand. Basically I couldn't ask him how his day was or stuff like that. All he would want me to do was read a book on the phone. He would go get a book and he would tell me what he got or my mom would tell me what book he picked out and I would make up a story because I don't know the books by heart so I'd make up a story. Or he would ask me to sing him a song at night.

Interviewer: Cool.

Kelly: So that was really the only way we really got to talk on the phone.

Kelly "read" her son a book by having him go pick out a book and she would make up a story and he would stay on the phone and listen because he thought she was reading that actual story to him. Her creativity allowed her to communicate with her son for a longer period on the phone. Creativity and routine phone calls appeared to be the way that parents and their children could effectively communicate and manage the additional uncertainties. Along with phone calls, snail mail in the form of letters, cards, pictures, drawings, and gifts were also ways to maintain these relationships.

Postal mail. Postal mail was most reliable for those in prison. However, in the military, postal mail was not as reliable because sometimes they would not receive their letters for months. In fact, Debbie Darcy who was away from her son on two deployments claimed that she beat some of her letters home from her six week deployment. However, once military personnel settled in their area and set everything up, postal mail became more reliable. Overall, besides a phone, letters were the most widely used form of communication because it was cost efficient. Parents and children often sent mail in the form of cards, pictures, drawings and gifts during holidays. Sometimes parents and children would send drawings and pictures with the letters.

This type of communication was effective and individuals spoke of how they lived for the next piece of mail they would receive whether it was military or incarcerated parents or children. For many incarcerated parents, receiving letters sometimes meant survival in prison as stated in the following excerpt by Anthony Hallman:

Interviewer: Good, that's cool. And then being away and then communicating, how did it feel to receive a letter from your family?

Anthony: It felt good, I mean, that's what you live for there. I mean, if not, you get caught up in the system. I mean, it felt really good. It felt like you were needed that you were wanted by someone. And I just looked at the faces of a lot of the other guys who didn't get mail...and some guys were there for, some had been there for 4 to 5 to 6 years and hadn't received one letter. And you know, sometimes they want to see your pictures. And you know, I would do that because I know how I would feel and I seen the hurt in their faces when they didn't receive anything. So it made you feel connected.

Anthony Hallman stated that he treasured the letters he received because it made him feel wanted. He did not feel forgotten unlike those others he said were in prison and had been there for years and had not received one letter. Letters and communication to families and friends on the outside of prison walls gave incarcerated parents a reason to get out of prison and to change. Just as distal parents liked to receive letters, children also enjoyed writing and receiving letters. In the following excerpt, Joanna Keeley talks about how her daughter treasured letters from her stepfather who was deployed:

Joanna: And the letters that Matt wrote her [daughter] it's kind of weird, but they're all in an underwear drawer and they're all laid out. And I asked her one day and I said "what is this underwear lining or your drawer lining here these letters" and she's like "mom stay out of my drawers." It's funny 'cuz she's just has bonded with him. And I've never seen her bond with anyone except for me and my parents [crying].

Joanna and her daughter, Julianne have always been close. However, when she got remarried to Mark, Julianne and Mark began to become close but became closer when he was deployed and the letters may have helped with that process. It appeared that Julianne treasured her letters from Mark because she kept them safe and hidden. Julianne wanted her letters to be safe and hidden because they either contained private information or were highly valued.

Only three participants provided documents during the interview even though it was asked that they bring documents if they felt comfortable doing so. Because participants often stated before the interview began that they did not have documents present with them at the interview, there is no numeric value to place on the number of

participants who stated that they did have documents, but did not want to bring them to the interview. Most participants stated that they had letters saved but one common answer was that they “were in a box somewhere.”

The fact that they did not want to bring the letters to the interview may mean that the letters were too treasured to disturb and/or they did not want to bring up memories of the difficult time they had or they felt it was private information they did not want to show to a stranger. One example came from the Nixon family who provided copies of letters, but they were letters only discussing positive aspects of their time away. The Nixon family had a difficult time while the mother was away on her deployment. In the following excerpt, William Nixon talked about how he and his wife saved all the letters:

William: Oh yeah, I was just saying that we was trying to find a letter or two to give to you to give to you and I was talking, well, I was reading them just because I kept them all, well, we got them all that she wrote me unless it was you know something stupid or not worth, but uh, we, like I said it was hard to find the letters that would be alright for someone to read because if it wasn't I wouldn't say it's not sexual, but you know those kinds of talk or I was mad at her or she was mad at me. Because I tell ya, I said a lot of things and done a lot of things while she was gone that I totally regret and I wish I hadn't said some of the things. But you know.

William talked about how there were many letters that he did not want to show because of the negativity and/or private information (i.e., communication about sex) involved in the letters. In fact later in the interview when asked about the negative statements he and

his wife said to each other, William stated that he actually cried when re-reading these letters to weed out which ones to provide.

William: Yeah, well, I was reading these letters and I was like man I was crying.

And some of these, I mean, I knew reading them, I knew right where I was at that time and why I said that and I know I said some mean things. We both did to each other. Not so much her. She would try to tell me what to do, and just that would make me mad.

Letters were a strong way to communicate for these participants and they were kept but not shown. The letters may have not been provided by other participants because they were treasured, held private information and they just did not feel comfortable showing them to a stranger, or they did not want to recall the negative time when the parent was away. When William provided the letters, he only provided the ones that were positive and not the ones that actually made him cry. This may be why other individuals did not provide documents because they may have only saved letters that made them recall the negative communication that transpired. William cried when re-reading all the letters to choose which ones to provide because the letters took him back to that time when his wife was gone and this illustrates how the letters were a powerful stimulus to recall all the events that took place while his wife was gone. Other types of maintenance behaviors used were e-mail and alternative ways to communicate. These were used by military families.

E-mail and alternative ways to communicate. E-mail was a reliable form of communication. However, it took some time to set up the military camps with computers being sent over there and lines being established to set up Internet access. In addition,

like the phones, depending on where they were located, some camps did or did not have computers for general use. If they did have computers for general use, they would have to wait hours to get on one. Therefore, four military members did not have an opportunity to communicate by e-mail because they did not have their own laptops or did not want to wait in line. Steve Bunde who was in Iraq talks about how he would have communicated by e-mail if he had a laptop.

Interviewer: Okay, and you communicated through letters and phone. Was it possible to communicate any other way with your family?

Steve: Yeah, I mean there is e-mail. If you had a laptop where you could you know go on line.

Interviewer: Okay.

Steve: I didn't have those assets to do so, so, just pencil and paper.

Steve stated that he did not have the money to buy a laptop so he just used pencil and paper. Generally, military members could not use e-mail because they did not have the assets for e-mail and capabilities for e-mail, but incarcerated parents could not use e-mail even if they did have the assets because they were restricted from online use in prison.

Other alternative ways to communicate that was mentioned only by two families were videoconferencing and Webcam. Families could sign up for times to go to the base and they could see and talk to their family member overseas and have a little conference. In addition Webcam was another expense that could be hooked up to their own computers and they could also see and talk to their family members through their computer line. This was only done by one military family but was said to be an effective way to communicate.

Visits. Visits were maintenance behaviors that both reduced uncertainties but also created additional uncertainties. Visits were a time when military members were back in the comfort of their home and not surrounded by danger and/or a squadron of men/women. Visits were a time to reconnect for military members. However what most family members talked about was the need for the visit to go perfect for those at home. Aisha Gentry talked about the emotional rollercoaster she went through when her husband was home. In the following excerpt she talks about how she wanted everything to go perfectly but he just wanted his own time and how much that bothered her.

Aisha: It was nice when you first meet and grab and hug and see each other and know that everything is alright. And then being home it was hard because you know they had to go back. But um, we would talk about different things and make sure that everything was lined up with the child and the kids. You know, visits were so brief, it was like, you hate to see him go. It was an emotional thing, you know?

Interviewer: Mm hmm. When did you start feeling those emotions?

Aisha: Well, after he got there it was great. But then like maybe two days later you might realize well heck, he's got to go back.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Aisha: And then all the emotions start filtering in and stuff. And then you want things to be perfect when they come home. And nothing could ever be perfect when they come home you know 'cuz everybody wanted to see him and all this stuff and he don't, he didn't want that, he just wanted to come home. Which is

understandable too, just to be alone and you know, capture his thoughts and be around the family and stuff.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Aisha: But then it was people were bombarding and that didn't make things any easier. It was already hard.

Aisha talked about how nice it was to have her husband home on leave to catch up. All three family members in the interview discussed how they used the visits as a time to catch up and have the father fix things while he was home. At the same time, even though it was nice to have her husband home, Aisha felt pulled by her emotions because she knew he would be leaving soon after he returned. In addition, to add to the stress of the visit, four military fathers discussed how they just wanted to come home and relax instead of seeing everyone and going everywhere. In fact, one military member told his wife to keep it a secret when he came home. In the following excerpt, Tim Rawling explained how he wanted it to be a secret when he came home.

Tim: I actually wanted my wife to keep it a secret that I was going to be home because in the past when I was on leave and on active duty, it was like everybody had to see you.

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Tim: And you almost had to account for your time. And you had to plan "okay, tomorrow, I'm going to see such and such." And I didn't want any part of that, I just wanted it to be a secret that I was going to be home and that way nobody would bother us.

Tim knew what it was like to come home and have extended family and friends want to take up every minute of time while home on a visit. Therefore, he explicitly told his wife to keep it a secret that he was coming home so he could use that time to relax instead of being rushed from place to place which would have caused additional anxiety.

Along with the emotional rollercoaster for family members at home during and after a visit, military members are also affected by the stress of a visit. Bob Grant, a career military member talked about his past in the military and how he was only on one deployment where he visited his family. Then he explained why he would not have taken a leave even if he had a choice in his last deployment.

Interviewer: Did you ever have any visits during your time away?

Bob: Just when I was in Korea, the Korea one, we came back on mid-tour leave. But everybody does come back and forth. But Korea, you are like stationed at a regular army post just overseas, you just can't take your family with you.

Interviewer: Right.

Bob: No, I think, I wouldn't have come home if I had the opportunity 'cuz it would be harder to go.

Interviewer: Why?

Bob: I just think, you know what you're going back into. Would I go back? Definitely. But I know some of those kids that came back. I see them there all happy when they were getting ready to go and then when they came back after their two weeks back in the states, which we'd lose 'em for about three and a half weeks 'cuz of travel. But those kids were just down.

Interviewer: Really?

Bob: Yeah, they were very sad because they know what they were going back to.

Interviewer: For how long?

Bob: I'd say a week, or about four to five days.

Bob stated how it took almost a week for soldiers to come back and get over their sadness from being home. So along with the rollercoaster of being home for a period of time, Bob stated that military individuals also feel upset when they go back to where they were stationed. All these excerpts illustrated that parents often have a difficult time during and after visits.

From the parent's perspective a visit can be stressful. However, what may be more important in all of this is the fact that all the military children talked about how much fun they had during their visit with their parents. In fact, one child, Cody who cried throughout the interview, began talking about his visit with his mom and two thirds of the interview was focused on that visit because it was the only thing he did not cry over when talking about his mom being away. They went to Disney World and that may have been a result of Cody's happiness, but even if that was the case, the other children who spoke of the visits only spoke of them with happiness.

Unlike military visitation where the military parent visits the family, visitation in prison depended on the family outside the prison walls and not the distal parent. Oftentimes, the families did not have the financial means necessary to travel the distance to the prison. Other than three individuals who had more than ten visits by their families, the rest of the individuals received one or two visits. Andy Babor was the only parent in prison that had his family visit him on a regular basis. His wife and son visited once a month on Sundays. His wife expressed how difficult it was always leaving after a visit

because their son would always cry and ask when his dad was coming home. Even though it made her son cry, she expressed that the constant contact helped improve her son's relationship with his father.

Visits can help a parent in prison cope with being incarcerated because they can physically be with their family. Louis Wayman and Derek Enderly both talked about how visits are like an escape from the everyday prison life and the visit gives an individual a glimpse of their life outside the prison walls. First, Louis Wayman talked about how he wished he could have seen his kids while he was in prison:

Interviewer: Okay and your kids did not come with your wife?

Louis: No because she had to get a ride with another girl who had a boyfriend down there.

Interviewer: Would you have wanted your kids to come?

Louis: Oh yes, most definitely.

Interviewer: Really, why is that?

Louis: Oh, 'cuz I love them. I enjoy seeing them. It makes my BIT [prison sentence] go a lot easier. And I just have a glimpse of my life in there. By seeing them it just gives me a chance to escape.

Louis claimed that seeing his kids would have helped his time in prison go much easier. Although Louis thought that seeing his kids would have helped him, he could not say for sure because his kids never came. However, Derek Enderly did see his kids and stated that the visits with his kids definitely made his time go easier and let him know what he had on the outside of the prison walls. In the following excerpt, Derek discusses what it was like seeing his kids.

Derek: Well, first I was up in [prison]. It's not that far from [prison]. They came three times to see me. My son, Jordon was 5, 4 months somewhere around there and they came. And that was really good, I mean I liked seeing Jordon running around and seeing him grow up. And he was real busy. And that was good. Visits help a lot.

Interviewer: Really?

Derek: Yeah. It's like therapy for a prisoner to see the people that love you and they take the time to come down and see you. You know it really means a lot. But after I left [prison] I left to go to [city] DOC work release. And they didn't come see me down there for transportation reasons and financial reasons...But um, yeah, when you get somewhere that's not a very cool place to be and then it's hard to be there dealing with the correctional officers and the inmates. You want to see a familiar face at least once in a while. To help you out to get you through it you know. Um, after a while when they don't come, you start to get used to it. You know you start going on with your life and at [city] DOC work release, you start working after a month. You know if you don't get into any trouble after a month, you start working. So once I started working, it became a whole lot easier to deal with.

Derek claimed that visits are like therapy for a prisoner. However he also stated that when his family could not visit him due to financial reasons when he was on work release, he got used to them not coming. He stated that he was able to get used to his kids not visiting by getting his mind on work once he started working everyday. This is a way

of managing the emotional climate in terms of cognitive dissociation, or detachment that will be discussed in the next section on emotional climate.

Emotional Climate

Besides being experienced with the distal separation and using transition planning, there was not too much else that these families stated could help prepare them for their distal separation. Even if the family communicates about the transition before the distal separation and communicates during the separation via email, phone, visits, etc., there is no guarantee that they will not feel a loss when their family changes from what they have always known. Golish and Dial (2002) claimed that there are no institutionalized proscriptions for how children should grieve the loss of a parent who is still alive but seemingly absent because they are not physically around. Ambiguous loss is a concept that has recently been examined in relation to uncertainty reduction and management (e.g., Golish & Dial, 2002; Powell & Afifi, 2005).

Communication is a means of managing uncertainty. In a discussion about uncertainty and ambiguous loss, Powell and Afifi (2005) extended research on ambiguous loss (i.e., the loss of someone who is still alive) in the context of adoption. Powell and Afifi found that adoptees claimed that uncertainty about their birth parent(s) was not a desired state, but rather one that many learned to manage and often purposefully maintained for fear that the search for their birth parents would produce an undesirable outcome. Some felt an initial rejection and did not believe they could handle a second rejection from their birth parent. Many also chose to maintain their current level of uncertainty for fear of disturbing the life of their birth parent, and discovering the truth about the circumstances of their adoption.

The main theory underlying Powell and Afifi's (2005) research was Brashers et al.'s (2000) uncertainty management theory. As stated in the literature review, Brashers et al. claimed that individuals appraise uncertainty for its meaning. Uncertainty that is appraised as danger is associated with emotions such as anxiety or distress. Additionally, communication is a primary tool for managing appraised uncertainty. One of the ways that individuals can manage uncertainty (and thus the emotional responses to it) is by managing interaction (e.g., by choosing to seek information or to avoid information). This research found that by managing their emotional climate, these participants were sometimes not necessarily reducing their uncertainties, but managing their uncertainties.

Perhaps the most important contribution to this research is the finding that these military and incarcerated parents and their children maintained their relationships and reduced and/or managed their uncertainties by managing the emotional climate (i.e., managing the closeness and distance of their relationship) and how they did this is equally important. As stated in the literature review, another form of maintenance is using techniques that either make individuals feel close or distant for the purpose of maintaining the existence of their relationship. The emotional climate is a concept normally discussed separately from maintenance. However, techniques can be used to become close or distant from a relational partner (Hess, 2002; Hess, Daulton, & Hudson, 2004) and these techniques could be used to maintain the existence of a parent/child distal relationship.

These families mainly used three closeness techniques and three distancing techniques to manage the emotional climate. The closeness techniques used came from Stafford and Canary's (1991) original work on maintenance behaviors in personal

relationships and Hess et al.'s (2004) work on closeness behaviors. Out of the five original behaviors Stafford and Canary listed, these families mainly used positivity (i.e., perceptions of the partner's cheerfulness and optimism) and assurances (i.e., the degree to which the partner stresses the future of the relationship). The third way these families managed their closeness was by using cognitive processes characterizing association (i.e., paying careful attention and having positive attributions) which was defined in Hess et al.'s work.

Along with trying to become close, these families also tried to manage their emotional climate by using distancing behaviors. Hess's (2002) research found that individuals used distancing in relationships with disliked partners as well as liked partners. However, no research found has examined the distancing behaviors that are used in families with a distal parent/child relationship. Therefore, the finding that these families used all three characteristics of distancing is an important aspect of this research. Specifically, the families mainly used cognitive dissociation (i.e., disregarding a message, derogating the other person, and/or cognitive and emotional detachment) and disengagement (i.e., hiding information about self, using disengaged communication style, and/or interacting less personally). However, a couple of parents also used avoidance (i.e., preventing an interaction episode from happening, changing behaviors to avoid other person, or reducing interaction during an encounter) for the purpose of maintaining their relationship. Before discussing the distancing techniques, how the families tried to become close will be explained first.

Positivity. Positivity was a technique that parents and their children stated that they used throughout their experiences. They stated that focusing on negatives only

created more stress. For example, Ashley Ardon in the following excerpt spoke of pointing out the good things when she was in prison:

Interviewer: Okay, what kinds of things would you talk to your children about when you would write them or call them?

Ashley: I would tell them how everything was there, like the library. You know, I tried to point out the good things. We had a good library there, you know. The weight room, a little movie theater. I tried to make it sound not so bad that I was okay.

Interviewer: Okay so you kind of focused on the positive things?

Ashley: Oh yeah definitely.

Just as Ashley spoke of focusing on positives in prison, George Gentry discussed how he tried to focus on the positives when he was overseas in the military:

George: You know, trying to keep them upbeat.

Interviewer: So they never knew if you were having a horrible time?

George: Right, right. Upbeat. Right, I wouldn't say to them that certain things happen that really upset you or if certain things happened at work, I wouldn't, or I was just, if I was really missing home, I wouldn't say that. Well, it wasn't an enjoyable time over there. You keep to yourself. I wasn't in Iraq of course, I wasn't being shot at, but some of the things that we had to put up with.

Interviewer: Right.

George: You know, but you keep a good attitude about it because I know it was probably hard on them being here on my wife especially. Keep upbeat.

George claimed that his family was having a hard time and he thought telling them what he was going through would be undue stress on his family. In fact, his wife mentioned in her interview after the tape recorder was off that she had such a difficult time that she went through a severe depression while her husband was away. She stated that it was difficult talking about everything during the interview because it brought back many of the negative feelings she had. So knowing that his family was having a difficult time with him just being away, George tried to remain “upbeat” when he talked to them and stayed focused on the positives.

An interesting finding regarding positivity can be broken down into two ideas generated from participants’ responses. First, participants stated that parents or caregivers should consistently talk about the distal parent to their children in a positive manner. Second, participants stated that parents should talk to the other parent about their child positively while the parent is away. Six families specifically talked about how important it is for families to talk about the distal parents positively. The following excerpt by Jasmine Summit details especially why it is important for a parent at home to speak of a parent in prison positively:

Interviewer: What advice would you give to any parent that’s about to face this?

Jasmine: It’s tough. It’s tough when you have to raise three kids, any kids by yourself. It’s hard but most parents whose fathers are gone, it’s hard for most kids. Most kids look up to their dad. Because even though my son, his father wasn’t there, he still gave a lot of respect. I never downside to him, you know turned him against his dad. Because I feel once, I said “if you don’t change, your son will see that in his eyes” and so I just tell the parent don’t judge your father

for your child, let your child judge their father for themselves. So my son judges him for himself and even though his dad wasn't there, he still gave him a lot of respect. He still loved his daddy, he was like "mommy where my daddy at?" He used to call and when he answered he used to talk to him and my son [is] old enough to know now that his daddy is there now. And he tells him that "I'm here for you, I'm going to always be here for you." And I tell any other parents that it's hard but you got to work through it. But it's tough on any parent. I don't care if they're in the military or whatever it's hard for any child for their parent to be gone because some kids ain't got no parents. So I tell my son "you're blessed that you got a father that does care even though he sometimes didn't show it, but he always cared." I guess I don't know what prison did to him but he changed a lot and I can say I'm proud of him.

Jasmine explicitly stated that she would tell her son to judge his father for himself. She would not talk negatively about his father to their son because she felt it was not her right to judge him for her son. This concept is relevant for both military and incarcerated parents. For example, there were military parents that could not call or did not set up a time to call and the parents at home had to speak positively to their children. The parents or caregivers at home had to try to explain to them why their mom or dad could not call such as in the following excerpt:

Aisha: It's hard to, you know, just through letters, like I said or call whenever he got a chance. Sometimes it would be a long time that he would not talk to her [daughter]. But I would encourage her, you know just tell her you know, that "dad

is going to be alright right now and he can't call right now and stuff and you know he can't talk.”

Aisha talked about how she had to explain to her daughter that her father could not call and it was evident that she put a positive spin on the fact that he did not call their daughter enough to help her daughter manage her uncertainty. Aisha is the mother who was discussed earlier who had disclosed after the interview that she went through a severe depression when her husband was gone. However, even though she went through a depression, it was evident that she knew she had to try to communicate positively about her husband to her children. Aisha's example as did other parents illustrates how parents at home have to maintain a balancing act with their emotions. Like Aisha, some talked about how sad they were that their partners were gone, but in the same respect, they felt they needed to remain positive for their children.

In addition to parents talking about the distal parents in a positive manner, the parents at home also had to manage how to talk to the distal parent about their children. This was a unique finding because one would normally think that a parent at home would want to tell the parent away about everything, including a bad grade in school. However, it was found that telling the whole truth would only create additional uncertainties. In the first excerpt, Sheila Grant claimed that talking about negative things regarding their children meant that the distal parent would then ask the child on the phone about it. When the child had waited for days for the phone call, this parent did not think it would be in the best interest for the child to have to talk about the negative thing such as a bad grade to their distal parent.

Sheila: I know that there are things to this day that I didn't tell him, you know about a bad grade. You know, he hasn't seen a report card, or you know, that I just didn't, I didn't want, then when he did have a conversation with the kids for it to be a negative conversation. Because they haven't talked to him for maybe two or three weeks and you don't want, I didn't want that when he did get on the phone a lecture to where they wouldn't want to talk to him.

Interviewer: Right

Sheila: You know, I wanted their experience to be positive and how can you not address it if he knows they're giving me problems.

Sheila stated that she wanted her kid's experience to be positive when they talked to their father and spending time on the phone with their father lecturing them would not be positive. Therefore, she focused on telling her husband the positive things about their children. Similarly, Joanna Keeley discussed how keeping the lines of communication positive for the distal parent created a more positive experience for the child.

Joanna: Always leave that line of communication open between the kids and the parent... You know just keeping them informed what is going on with the kids. You know, tell him about how the kids did in something good and then him tell her "hey I heard this, I'm proud of you" you know hearing those things for her, she's like, ah, he's keeping up, mom told him what's going on.

Joanna chose to tell her husband the positive things about her daughter so her husband could call their daughter separately and say "I'm proud of you." It is a way to make the children feel special and loved. Another way for children and parents to feel close was the use of assurances.

Assurances. The assurances found in this research were of two main types. The first would be the parents telling the children they will be home in the future. This could either be the distal parent telling the children they will be home around a certain date or the parent at home assuring their children that the distal parent will be home. The second type of assurance was one used by the incarcerated parents. They promised their families and their children that they were doing well for themselves and that they have changed their actions.

The first type of assurance was used by both the distal parent and the parent at home to help the children look to the future. Parents would do this by telling their children they would be home at a certain date or that they would be home sometime in the future. In the following excerpt, George Gentry told his children that when he got home from being deployed they would do certain activities that they used to do so the children have some activities to look forward to.

George: You did things like that. And when you did talk to 'em, you know it was things like you'd say "when I get home we're gonna do this or do that?"

Interviewer: Oh, so you look forward to things?

George: Right, right. A lot of things that we'd done in the past. So it was that kind of thing.

Interviewer: Okay

George: All you could do is say what you're gonna do when you get home pretty much. I tried to not to, of course, not let them feel like I was never having a bad time.

Another method of looking forward to the future was the mention of counting down the days. Incarcerated families did not mention doing this. However, five military families mentioned counting down days until their parent came home. For example, the Keeley family made a red/white/blue chain and as each day passed, they ripped off one link. Another family had a rather unique way of counting down as nine year old Myrna described in the following excerpt:

Myrna: We worked on that elephant over there and we put a bunch of jewelry on it.

Interviewer: Oh wow. When did you do that?

Myrna: When he was gone.

Interviewer: Really?

Myrna: That was our thing. Like it tells how many days he was gone. And you see, we never finished it 'cuz he like, he got home.

Interviewer: Oh, that is really creative. Did you start that right away?

Myrna: Uh huh.

Interviewer: Whose idea was that?

Myrna: My mom's. I was like "wow," we get to like do something. It's almost like a calendar.

Interviewer: Wow, so explain it to me a little bit more.

Myrna: It's an elephant that has a baby and a bunch of jewelry on it. We went shopping and just like bought a bunch of necklaces and stuff and then glued it on it.

Interviewer: And so every day you would do this?

Myrna: Mm hmm.

When asked if there was anything else she wanted to tell me about her father being gone, Myrna talked about the elephant that her family worked on while her father was gone. Each piece of jewelry glued on the elephant symbolized the amount of days her father was gone. And as a symbol to her father's return, they displayed the elephant in the living room and she proudly explained the concept of how that helped her days go by faster.

Another type of assurance used was an assurance that incarcerated parents used. Trust is often broken when a parent is taken to jail and the parents often find themselves trying to regain their families' trust. The majority of these participants promised their families and their children that they were doing well for themselves and that they have changed. To illustrate this, Heather Wayman, a twelve year old daughter of a father who was incarcerated, stated the following about her father.

Heather: Yeah, but I didn't get to see him much because he just kept getting moving. He kept saying on the phone that he is making a bad problem into a good solution. He went to school. He got a college degree in there. He's trying to go to [college] now and so technically, I don't think that if he wasn't in there, he probably wouldn't be where he is at now. So I feel okay with it. I didn't feel like he's in there beating up people and not doing good you know?

Heather's father assured her that he was doing well for himself in prison as many of the parents did. However, this research found that families only give their parents so many chances to prove themselves and then the assurances do not matter. For example, Caitlin Frank, who was being interviewed because her mother was incarcerated, spoke of her father who has been incarcerated many times throughout his life. When asked about him,

she stated that he has tried to reestablish a relationship with her, but she does not want it. First Caitlin's aunt, Sarah who took care of Caitlin while her mom was in prison spoke of Caitlin's relationship with her dad.

Sarah: And something that I've noticed about Caitlin's relationship with her dad, is [that] he's only been out one full year since she's been born.

Interviewer: Oh my word.

Sarah: He's been in and out and in and out. You know, three month break, back again. And you know, I used to have to tell Caitlin because he would call her and talk to her like "you know what are you talking to me about like parental stuff for?" You know and she had finally told him she's like "I'm going to be an adult when you get out" she said "I'll probably be graduated from college by then" you know.

Sarah talked about how Caitlin's father has been in and out so much of her life that Caitlin has given up on the idea of a relationship with him. In fact, when Caitlin talked about him she stated the following:

Interviewer: And your dad is also gone right?

Caitlin: Yes

Interviewer: And how does that make you feel?

Caitlin: I really don't care anymore.

Interviewer: And so did that take time to not care?

Caitlin: Yeah. Like when he comes back and stuff like every time he comes back, I feel like I don't know him. I mean, I don't barely talk to him. I mean, he's still my dad.

Caitlin obviously had a difficult time believing her father's assurances and has given up to the point where she "doesn't care anymore." When assurances are given to children, parents have to make sure they are going to be followed through. Similarly, three military parents stated that they cannot make false promises to their children because oftentimes assignments get extended and then the kids will feel disappointed. So there is a fine line that parents have to manage when making assurances.

Because children place a high stake in a visit or the return of a parent, parents should be wary about managing what they should tell their children about the time period of when they will be home. The following example is taken from a pilot study when eight parents who were away from their children for any reason, including school and work were interviewed (Hudson, 2004). Although this example did not come from a military or incarcerated parent, this example is important to include because it illustrates the effect on a child when a parent does not arrive as planned. Jennifer who was away from her son because she was working on her Ph.D. discussed how important it was to be explicit with her child, Jacob and yet at the same time, she talked about how a parent should not make false promises:

Jennifer: I think the other thing is that if you, we did like a calendar where Jacob at the beginning the semester we would like plan when I would come home and we would be very careful not to deviate from that. Like if you tell your child I am going to be home in 6 weeks and I am going to be home on this day, then you'd better be home. Because they don't, at least Jacob didn't deal well with the one time when I couldn't come home. It was really, it was very difficult for him. He got very upset, didn't want to get out of bed, didn't want to do anything, get up

and go to school. Just you know, well “why isn’t she coming?” “Aren’t we important to her anymore?” He is just very sensitive. So I think um making a calendar is a good idea and that worked really well for us.

Jennifer discussed that it is important to be explicit when communicating with your children so they look forward to the time the parent comes home like they did with the use of a calendar. However, she felt what could be considered a dialectical tension of openness vs. closedness. The relational dialectical theory (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) asserts that there is a tension between what to tell (openness) and what not to tell (closedness) in relationships. Specifically, in this instance, telling her son that she was coming home meant that Jennifer had to come home or else that would put him into depression if she did not follow through with her word.

Cognitive process characterizing association. Positivity and assurances were the main techniques used to establish closeness. However, another concept was the idea that these families used cognitive process characterizing association (i.e., paying careful attention and having positive attributions). Basically either the parent away had rituals that symbolized the family was still with them and the families at home also utilized rituals to symbolize the parent is still with them.

Parents away would feel close by doing things such as looking at pictures or re-reading letters. When asked how they felt close to their families, eight out of the twelve military parents and eight of the eleven incarcerated parents stated that pictures were a way for them to feel close. Anthony Hallman explains why pictures mean so much to a distal parent in the following excerpt:

Interviewer: Okay. Um, can you tell me how you felt close to your family while you were incarcerated?

Anthony: Um the only thing that really kept me connected to them was the pictures. My wife would send pictures and my mom would send pictures of different events. And I wasn't there, but it felt like it was because in the pictures they'd be saying things or writing stuff at the bottom of the pictures "wish you were here, this is what we did" such and such. And so they kind of, that's how I felt connected. Um, just by receiving those pictures.

Anthony stated that receiving pictures of certain events helped him feel close. They made him feel close because his family took the time to try and involve him in certain events by telling him what they did on the picture. By doing so, he could actually visualize what the events looked like and see his family at a place in time that he physically had no part of. Similarly, Tanya Kirk stated that she also felt close to her family by the pictures they sent her.

Interviewer: How did you feel close with your family?

Tanya: Well, oh, I still have it downstairs by the computer, but um, my husband when they started school in August, my husband took, of course you take pictures of the first day of school and their outfits and stuff like that. So he had three or four pictures taken and he put it on the computer and sent it to me in e-mail and so I printed it out. I had it, not laminated, but in a plastic cover or whatever, a sheet protector. And um, I had that up in my um, my tent by the bed and so it was like, yeah, so pictures like that.

Tanya stated that her husband sent pictures of their children's first day of school. By sending the picture of such an important day, it made her cognitively feel close to her family. When asking her more about the picture, she disclosed that the first day of school has always been important for her and she made a big deal out of the first day every year. Since she was not around for their first day during this particular year, the pictures helped her feel a part of that special day that she had made a big deal out of in previous years.

Children also had ways to connect and feel close to their distal parents. Children, like their parents, looked at pictures to feel close. However, there were additional ways that kids felt close. For example, two families mentioned their children having teddy bears that represented their parents and that their parents were with them all the time when the teddy bear was with them. Ann Strathman talks about her son and his teddy bear in the following excerpt:

Ann: When I left, I bought him this little bear it is a red, white, and blue and it's got little stars on it and stuff. And he named it Sammy which I thought was kind of funny, Uncle Sam. [laugh]. I thought that was funny. But um, he named it Sammy and I told him that every night before he went to bed to make sure he had Sammy there and because that was like you know having mommy there. And that's what um, when I left that's what I represented of going away. So he took care of Sammy. He's still got him.

Ann talked about how important Sammy was to her son. She went on to talk about how he made sure Sammy was always with him wherever he went and for her son, Sammy was a symbol of his mom being there with him.

The three main techniques used for closeness that these parents and children used were positivity, assurances, and cognitive processes characterizing association. Since this research found that the families also used techniques to distance themselves for the good of the relationship, those techniques will be discussed next. Specifically, the three distancing techniques used were cognitive dissociation, disengagement, and avoidance.

Cognitive dissociation. Out of any closeness or distancing technique used, cognitive dissociation was the most widely used technique talked about for maintaining these parent/child relationships. Cognitive dissociation is defined as disregarding a message, derogating the other person, and/or cognitive and emotional detachment (Hess, 2002). Cognitive and emotional detachment was a way for both families at home and distal parents to manage their uncertainties and cope with being away or having a parent being away. Out of all the families interviewed, there were two that did not mention using this. The families that did, used cognitive dissociation by putting their family member out of their mind, but used an actual behavior to put their family member out of their mind by “keeping busy.”

Some participants talked about this concept as if it were a survival technique. The military members stated that they could not properly function as soldiers if their minds were always on their families and a couple of incarcerated parents stated that they could not survive in prison if they were focused too much on what their family was doing. In the following example, Steve Bunde talked about what it was like when trying to function as a soldier when he had his mind on his family.

Interviewer: Okay. With everything that you went through, did you have any attempts to become distant for the good of your family?

Steve: I tried not to think about 'em. Actually, I did that all the time.

Interviewer: Really?

Steve: I mean, when I was on leave, like, I'd come from going to Iraq back to Kuwait. Yeah, it was hard 'cuz I thought of them all the time being that I wasn't on the battle field no more. Well, I know a lot of guys that, it didn't really affect me that much, but they just think of their families too much and they wouldn't function as a soldier I guess. Uh, they found it hard to go on patrols and just more or less, I [laugh] don't really know what the word to look for but, they didn't function properly as a soldier when they, you know, thought of their family or whatnot or they weren't focused on what they were doing.

Interviewer: Yeah, right.

Steve: And that caused a lot of problems for a lot of different soldiers. As for one guy, he brought the whole team down 'cuz, he couldn't function as a soldier so, two other guys had to do their job.

Steve discussed how he attempted to get his mind off his family by keeping busy and volunteering to do jobs around the camp. Thinking about family sounded as if it was a hindrance to the job for Steve because he claimed that you cannot properly fight the war if your mind is not with the task at hand but on family abroad. Another aspect of survival and getting their mind off family was for the incarcerated parents in prison. In the following example, Louis Wayman discusses how he had to get his mind off his family to survive because people would take advantage of that emotional side.

Louis: Yeah they would write me. Maybe every other month. We started writing more as it got short as I got down under a year. Because during the early part of

my BIT [prison sentence] I would tend to stray away from them because it makes you know doing the time harder if you're thinking about your family all the time.

Interviewer: You know I want to know about that because that's one of the questions I had about distancing yourself.

Louis: Yeah, well, I try to. Well, that's what you have to do and when you are incarcerated, I mean, like your family shows another side of you. A compassionate side, you know a sentiment side. But when you are in an institution, you know, you have no room for that. So I had to, I had to really put on a façade in there to really just to survive.

Louis talked about how there was no room for the sentimental side in prison or else people would take advantage of you while there. He stated how he had to get his mind off his family and had to put on a façade to survive in prison. He did not specifically state any behaviors used to get his mind off his family but the following examples will list some of the behaviors these participants used.

The behaviors distal parents used to get their families off their mind were numerous. The following excerpt illustrates how a father in prison got his mind off his family. Andrew Marks who spent eleven years in prison stated that he had to get his mind off his family to survive.

Andrew: I started out thinking about them like the first two years. And my son, dealing with my son's mother, you know it was crazy, you know, it was, I couldn't do it. I couldn't take it. You know, so another person, an older person told me it was like you can't, you just can't be dwelling on what's going on out there, it's going to tear you apart... That's how I learned and I was like, man I'm

ain't going to get in no school, I'm going to wait until the end. He was like "nah, you better get in there now and you won't regret it at the end, at the end of your bit." So I jumped and I jumped and got my GED, jumped in barber school, started college, I didn't finish college until I got to [prison].

To get his mind off his family, Andrew obtained many degrees. He spent the first two years thinking about his family and then after that, it got too hard for him. He was not going to get his degrees until the end of his time but a fellow inmate who had been there for some time told him that he should not wait and that he needed to focus on being inside, not what was going on outside.

Other behaviors used for military members and their families were found in the following examples. One mother at home, Aisha Gentry kept herself busy to the point where it became obsessive and she stayed up late at night folding laundry. Another mother, Kelly Johnson, who was away from her two year old son, Caleb, stated that it was really difficult for her at first because all she did was think about him. However, she was in military school and her instructors noticed difficult of a time she was having and told her that she could start going out at night. Once she did, she found it much easier. In the following excerpt, Kelly Johnson talked about the process of how keeping busy helped her get her mind off her son.

Kelly: I really didn't cry that much because I don't show feelings in front of other people. I mean, unless, I mean in front of a friend I would do it. But I um, basically at night when I went to bed after I talked to him on the phone I would get upset and cry all the time. But it didn't last long. I got to go out and enjoy

myself a lot while I was there and it took my mind off of him. I mean I was worried about him a lot, but I got to go out.

Kelly stated that the behavior of going out helped her get her mind off being away from her son. Kelly used to cry every night after she talked to her son and going out helped her.

The children who were interviewed also had advice on ways that helped them get their mind off their parents. In the following excerpt, Joey Rawling stated that advice he would give to other children is to keep busy through extracurricular activities:

Interviewer: What would you tell other kids who were about to go through this with a parent going away? Because you seem to have come through it okay, so what would you tell these kids to say this is how you get through it?

Joey: Just get through it. And just don't think about it a lot. And do like extracurricular activities.

Joey was quiet throughout the whole interview but when asked what advice he could give other kids, he sounded sure when he claimed that kids have to get their mind off their parents by doing things. In the following, eight year old Hailey Grant stated that she thought getting her mind off her dad helped her and she did it by not really talking about him.

Interviewer: Um, if you were to tell another, maybe one of your friends that is going to have a parent going away, what would you tell them?

Hailey: That it is going to be really really sad when they go away.

Interviewer: What would you tell them to help them get over their sadness?

Hailey: Just um, try to forget about it and try to keep your mind off them, but still have your dad, the person in your mind, but just don't talk about him.

Similar to Joey, Hailey got her mind off her father by not thinking about him and she did so by not talking about him to other people. For her, talking about him meant that she was thinking about him. Not talking about her father ties in with the next concept of disengagement (i.e., hiding information about self, using disengaged communication style, and/or interacting less personally) that was used by military and incarcerated parents and their children.

Disengagement. Parents and their children were open. But openness is defined as not withholding any information (Hess, 2002) and the majority of these families discussed withholding information which directly ties into the openness/closedness dialectic (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Disengagement is a distancing technique that was used to maintain the distal familial relationships and it was used as a way to manage uncertainty, not reduce their uncertainty. Disengagement was found in two forms. First, the parent away would not talk about all the bad things that are going on or that have gone on. Second, individuals from home would also not tell the parent away negative things.

The distal parents first would not talk about all the negative things. One example from a parent away comes from Bob Grant who was almost struck by a grenade. He stated in the interview that he always tells his soldiers not to tell their families back home the close calls they have been in because families do not need undue stress. When he did not tell his wife about a grenade incident, his friend who was also in the attack told his

wife who then told Bob's wife and Bob was upset about that because he felt his family did not need to hear that as he stated in the following example:

Bob: So, yeah, and I probably, you know, it's just something he doesn't need to [tell], and I tell him that, "don't stress them out" and if they ask how things are going, tell 'em its going well. And if you see anything, don't brag. And some of these guys would make stories up.

Bob felt that soldiers who are deployed or on assignment should not tell their families when a negative event, such as a grenade attack, has occurred. He stated that it will only worry their families because their families can not visibly see that the military parents are safe. When soldiers are deployed, families only have their imaginations to visualize what they think is going on and hearing negative things will only make them visualize the worst. A good example illustrating how hearing about negative events affects families comes from Bob's wife, Sheila, who Bob was not going to tell about the grenade attack. Sheila found out from Bob's friend's wife and from then on, Sheila was worried for her husband's safety. In her interview, Sheila talked about how she questioned her faith when asked if she felt any uncertainties.

Interviewer: Did you feel any uncertainties during this time that your husband was away?

Sheila: I have uncertainties um that, am I doing the right thing, am I making the right decision, um, is he coming home? I mean, those kinds of things. Um, what would I do? You see, I here I am getting emotional, I don't want to get emotional [crying].

Interviewer: I'm sorry.

Sheila: No, that's okay. Um, you didn't want to deal with those possibilities but it was reality, it was happening right in front of us to our friends. And so, at some point, you had to step back and make sure you had a plan. And I firmly believe that if you have a plan, you won't need it. And so, and so, here he is [laugh] um, you know and some days, you question your faith, you question all kinds of things, um, when you go through that. But just mainly those kinds of things. You know, was I making the right parenting kind of decisions. Its tough.

Although Sheila and Bob and their two children had been through many deployments in the past because Bob was a career military member, Sheila stated that this one was the hardest deployment on her. She stated it was difficult because the reality of her husband dying had become real when she and her children had to attend twelve funerals of military members from her husband's unit who had died while fighting.

Sheila was a woman who at first appeared as if she took this deployment in stride and it did not bother her. But then she began crying when recalling the memory of her uncertainties and it showed worry that she probably felt during the time her husband was away. Her husband said that she had found out about the grenade attack and it could be assumed that her emotions and his statements about the grenade attack could coincide. Also her emotions could be related in general to the danger her husband was in considering twelve people from his unit were killed by the time he arrived home. In addition to that, their son, Neil disclosed in his interview that his mom took up faith for the first time while his dad was gone and she has been going to church with his sister ever since their dad returned home.

As was evident from the above excerpts, parents who were away often hid information that would worry or upset their families at home. Similarly, families who were at home often hid information as well. A good example of families at home hiding information was provided in the positivity section with the discussion of parents at home not telling their children's problems to the distal parent so the child could have a positive phone conversation with the distal parent. However, parents and their children at home also hid information to help the distal parents. For example, Kelly Johnson's mother was taking care of her son and she said that her mother did not tell her how sick her son actually was so she would not be so upset.

Interviewer: And so when he went to the hospital, how did you find out?

Kelly: Um, actually my mom's the kind of person that won't tell me anything, like if anything's wrong with him, but I kept calling and asking how he was and she was like "oh he's fine" and I was like "okay" and um, I could tell something was wrong because she's like "oh he's a little sick" and if she says a little sick, she means like she had to stay home with him for two days from school. I guess he wasn't as bad as what I thought it was, but it was worse than what she said it was.

Kelly's mother would not tell her that her son was sick. But when she found out he was a little sick, she called her sister who then told her that her son went to the hospital and Kelly ended up crying for a whole weekend because she could not be there for her son. Similarly, Steve Bunde's wife hid information from him about his daughter being sick but he did not find out about it until he was home. He stated the following about that situation:

Steve: When Mariah got tubes put in her ears, I was gone. And apparently she was really sick for a while and I was gone. And just some of the things that really kind of upset me was that my family issues that would come up and nobody would tell me. And every time I called home it was like “oh everything’s great and nothing’s going wrong.”

Interviewer: Oh okay.

Steve: And then um I hear from somebody else you know, “hey there is something wrong in your family and you might want to call home.” I call home and everything is great, and don’t worry about nothing.

Interviewer: Oh, so if you were the parent at home, how would you have done it differently?

Steve: I’d do it the same. Don’t tell them that there is anything wrong.

Interviewer: Oh, okay.

Steve: You know what I mean, I just, knowing that, made me a little, well, I wasn’t functioning right as a soldier. I was too concerned of my family and thinking of home a lot when I should’ve had my head in the game.

Similar to Kelly, Steve was upset when he found out that his child was sick. He stated that he “wasn’t functioning right as a soldier” and was too concerned about his family. Although he was upset about not being told, he said he would have done the same thing as his wife because of how that kind of information affects a parent who is absent.

Avoidance. The last distancing technique used was not used as much but was still used by some parents. Avoidance (i.e., preventing an interaction episode from happening, changing behaviors to avoid other person, or reducing interaction during an encounter)

has been specifically discussed in literature (e.g., Brashers et al., 2000) as a way to manage uncertainty. Avoidance was used as a way to manage uncertainty if individuals were having problems. For example, William and Sally Nixon were having problems in the middle of her deployment and she mentioned in her interview how she would purposely not call William at certain times for fear that it would only cause more problems.

Avoidance was also used when a parent returned to the family as a way to manage uncertainty and this was evident in the following participant's response about her husband's actions. George Gentry's wife discussed how her husband changed when he came back into the family and now he sits in their basement in solitude, not communicating.

Aisha: You know, he's more reserved and to himself and maybe they're thinking about what went on. Because I don't know.

Interviewer: And this is even now. And this is what, 9 months after he came back?

Aisha: Mm hmm. And he's still more reserved and more solitary and in solitude. You know like in the basement, it is all completed and everything but he likes sitting down there with the big screen TV just by himself most of the time.

Interviewer: Now is that, that's a change from before?

Aisha: Yeah, it's a big change, yeah. He's more, he's not even communicative. I think he's worried, or just. He might be worried about going back.

Aisha discussed an important concept in terms of her husband returning back home and avoiding his family by sitting by himself down in the basement. Many individuals had a

difficult time returning home. In fact, every single parent expressed how odd or difficult it was to return to the family which will be discussed in the next section.

Of particular interest with this concept is avoidance was used as a way for two incarcerated individuals to feel close. After a period of calling, the two parents mentioned that they would not call for a week or two and they would do this just to get a happy response from their families. It made them feel wanted and needed. For example, Derek Enderly discussed how he stopped calling for periods of time so he would have more to talk about with his wife.

Interviewer: Okay, and some people, on the other side of feeling close, some also in order to keep the relationship alive also do distancing things. Like want to distance themselves. Were there times that you distanced yourself from your family while you were gone?

Derek: Yeah, um, I talked to her on the phone one day and I told her I'm not going to call for about a week or two and she'd be like "why?" and I'd be like "Because I want to put some distance in between our calling so we don't get tired of each other calling and run out of things to say." And then once I called her in two weeks you know I heard a different tone in her voice when she answered the phone and she was excited to hear from me. You know we got more to talk about because you know that distance in between.

Not calling for a couple of weeks made Derek feel more appreciated because his wife was excited to hear from him. Avoidance was used as a way to feel close in this situation, and this supports the idea that distancing techniques should not always be regarded as just being used to create distance in a relationship (Hess, 2002). Rather, this research

illustrated that distancing behaviors should be viewed as those which help create balance between the closeness and distance continuum.

Balancing the emotional climate. Individuals usually define a relationship by describing the emotional climate and how close they are. However, family systems theory indicates that distance needs to be regulated or families may become dysfunctional with too much closeness or too much distance. When the equilibrium is thrown off balance due to such things as a parental leave, uncertainty occurs. Uncertainty can be reduced and/or managed by using closeness and distancing techniques. This research found that families balanced the equilibrium of closeness and distance by using positivity, assurances, and cognitive processes characterizing association as closeness techniques and cognitive dissociation, disengagement, and avoidance as distancing techniques. The implication for the techniques used for balancing the emotional climate meant that families who became too close or too distant experienced unhealthy outcomes.

To support this claim, there an example is provided by one military mother and her family that appeared to have maladaptive outcomes in this study because they could not adapt to change. The military family was Sally Nixon's family. They had a difficult time throughout the year and a half Sally was gone. William stated the following about his relationship with Sally:

William: We work at the same place so. And that's another thing, I mean when she left we was together 24/7, you know we went to church together, went to, we do construction so we would do side jobs together, we'd do crafts together. We do everything together. I mean, we even work together, that's how we became friends and um, she just, that was ripped away.

William stated that they did everything together before she left and it was all ripped away. They were used to doing everything together and when she left, he did not know what to do with himself. The husband adopted dysfunctional methods of dealing with her absence. William was barely a father to their children, and would leave them to cook for themselves and would go on long drives by himself while their kids were at home. They called each other on the phone all the time and he would say negative things to her like having her choose between him and the army:

William: I tell ya, I said a lot of things and done a lot of things while she was gone that I totally regret and I wish I hadn't said some of the things. But you know.

Interviewer: Like what?

William: Oh, [pause] well, I said "if you ever come back and you don't get out of the army, it's either pick me or the army."

Their connectedness affected Sally and she talked about it in the interview. But even more poignant is a statement made by someone in Sally's unit who was also interviewed and without prompting, she talked about the difficult time Sally had. When talking about her son's troubles, Ann Strathman claimed that individuals talked about their families all the time in her office and in the process she also talked about Sally's troubles in the following excerpt:

Interviewer: What um, when you were thinking about this [son's troubles], about how many times a day do you think you thought about it, about not being here and him moving around and all that?

Ann: I don't know, every ten minutes maybe. It was on my mind all the time.

Interviewer: Did you talk to anyone about it there?

Ann: Oh yeah. Yeah, Sgt. Nixon. I mean, the one office I was in, we were like a family, you know, and one would come in the office. I mean we were all talking about our families. And Sgt. Nixon had to deal with a lot.

Interviewer: I am interviewing her tomorrow.

Ann: Oh yeah? God, you'll get a lot from her. Her husband, now if she tells you the truth, her husband treated her like shit. He had her crying on the phone all the time. All the time. Threatening to divorce her and it was just awful. It was horrible...I was like oh so mad at him.

The problems in Sally's family was seen among others, as Ann demonstrated in her statement about how mad she was at William for treating Sally so horribly. It appeared that their struggle between autonomy and connection occurred before the wife departed because William stated that they did everything together before his wife left.

The relational dialectical theory (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) could be one avenue to explain their difficulty in balancing emotional climates. Contradiction is the central concept of relational dialectics and the theory is founded on the idea that relationships are organized around the dynamic interplay of opposing tendencies as they are enacted in interaction. (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Dialectical perspectives assume that the central characteristic of relationships is change and there needs to be a management of contradictory tensions, such as the tension between autonomy and connection (Baxter, 1994).

Sally and William had trouble balancing between autonomy and connection which also illustrated that they had trouble adapting to change. The ability for families to

adapt to change is a concept found within the family systems theory (Speer, 1970). This concept indicates that if a family cannot adapt to change, they will be dysfunctional because they will try to become static when it is virtually impossible in an ever changing world. Families have to negotiate a balanced equilibrium or a balance between change and stability. For example, Steier et al. (1982) asserted that families who cling to familiar patterns at the expense of adapting to change can be dysfunctional. Therefore, an ideal family system in terms of transitions would be one that is able to adapt to change when they have to. William and Sally were not adapting to the change because they were trying to hold on to the emotional closeness they had while they were in physical proximity. However, by doing so, they did not take into account that she was hundreds of miles away and trying to talk all the time only made it more difficult.

In this section, there was a discussion about how these families maintained their relationships and there was a break down of each major maintenance technique used, specifically phone calls, postal mail, alternative forms of communication, and visits. Second, this section discussed how these families managed their emotional climate. Specifically, to manage closeness, these participants used positivity, assurances, and cognitive processes characterizing association and to manage distance, the participants used cognitive dissociation, disengagement, and avoidance. The next section will discuss the third research question about the parent's return into the family.

Research Question Three

The third research question asked what communication strategies parents and children use once the parent has reentered the family. The return into the family illustrated a honeymoon effect because they were excited to see each other at first, but the

excitement dissipated. Many of the distal parents were without all the responsibilities that they had before they left and after they returned. In addition, the incarcerated parent's return resulted in trying to regain the trust of their family members, especially their children. Finally, the families also had to readjust to the role changes which resulted in uncertainties for the families because the children had taken on adult roles while their parent was gone. Therefore the return was bitter sweet because they were excited to see each other, but they also had issues to deal with once the parent returned.

Responsibilities

For those in the military, the biggest problem coming back into the family was the idea that they were basically living a single life when deployed and coming back to the responsibilities was difficult. Jacky Hart discussed what it was like the first week her husband came home. They had their first baby while he was gone over a year and then he had to come home to parenting responsibilities.

Interviewer: What was it like the first week after he came home?

Jacky: The first week went pretty good. We had you know a few like minor fights just because he hadn't been a parent, or an acting parent to our daughter yet. So, if he would do things different than I would do you know or something like that, I didn't get mad at him for doing it, I would say you know and I think we'd both go on the defensive you know just being apart for so long.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Jacky: Um, but it was easy for the most part. He didn't have to work, so it was just visiting all of his family. And then the second week, he didn't have to work

yet, but uh, we were staying home and visiting his family and watching movies and just spending quality time together. And then it got kind of rough afterwards.

Interviewer: Why?

Jacky: Um, uncertainties I guess.

Interviewer: Like what?

Jacky: He, he questioned if he wanted to be with me or not. I'm not sure why and I never really got answers about it, but uh, what he said was that he felt trapped because at the time [baby crying] John please. "Danielle come here" [father talking] because um he felt trapped when he left because you know all he had was me. And then when he came it was "you got to do this, you got to do that, and you can't just go next door to your friend's house whenever you want." He had freedom down there, he didn't have to ask me "oh, I'm going to go out with my friends and drink after work" or something like that because I wasn't there. And now that he's here, it is just common courtesy to let me know if he's going to be doing something or not. And so that big change kind of put some uncertainties in him and made him feel like he was feeling trapped.

Jacky discussed how her husband felt trapped when he came home because he had the responsibilities of being a father when he came home. After a year and a half of doing nothing but living a single life, he had a difficult time readjusting according to his wife. In fact, as shown in the excerpt, the baby was crying and even though Jacky was doing the interview, her husband did not get up from the computer to attend to the baby. It took Jacky to ask him to take care of the baby for him to get up and stop her from crying. This

scene may have reinforced what Jacky was saying in the excerpt about her husband not being ready for the responsibilities of being a father.

Similarly, Steve Bunde actually spoke of how difficult it was coming home to his family of two girls and his wife. His wife said that he drank for three months straight when he got home and it took him that long to realize that he needed to be responsible. Although their relationship remained intact, she and their two girls did not move in with him until he could prove that he could be responsible. Steve spoke of why it was difficult for his transition, but interestingly, he never mentioned that his wife took three months to move in with him when he got back.

Interviewer: What is it like being back now?

Steve: I miss it.

Interviewer: Really? You miss being over there?

Steve: Well it's just, you just get accustomed to it. You know a way of life. I don't know, it's strict, but it's fine, I mean, after a while of doing it, you get accustomed to it. But occasionally, I will call and talk to my friends on the phone or come to town, but not really a whole lot. I don't do anything now, I'm married...I go to work and come home and play with the kids and maybe go out to eat with my wife, that's about it.

Interviewer: Right, right. So you kind of miss that kind of, well, in a way, it's like a single, you don't have the responsibilities of kids and stuff like that?

Steve: Yes. Yeah, that was, it was kind of nice 'cuz you know you didn't have the hassle. But in a way it way it really wasn't 'cuz uh, here I get up at 6 and there I got up at 4...but yeah, I mean you really get used to it. I mean, and then after a

while of not doing it, you miss it. Like I worked out there every day. I did cardio workout in the morning for an hour or ½ hour and the evening I would do my weights. And that was another hour. And then read a book or just whatever, go swimming, lay out and get a tan.

Living the single life can be tempting as it was for Steve. It was so tempting in fact that he had a difficult time transitioning and missed the daily routine of not having the daily responsibilities. He could no longer work out every day, read a book, and get a tan whenever he wanted.

Ironically, prison was also stated by two parents to be easier than returning home. When talking about how difficult she has had it coming back into the community with all the responsibilities, Ashley talked about how prison was actually much easier than transitioning back into the community

Interviewer: Yeah, I've heard that prison is really easy too.

Ashley: It is easy. It's easy. Every hour you have a movement. You can go to the library which is like the county library, you check books out like it's, it's awesome. Computers, newspapers for all the towns. You have a weight room out of this world. You can go over and watch movies, play pool, all the exercise equipment, aerobics. It's too easy. Crafts that you don't have to pay for. It's too easy there, it's too easy to get into that just laying around. Three meals a day.

You send your laundry out Mondays and Thursdays.

Ashley Ardon discussed how prison was rather easy with little responsibilities. Both military and incarcerated parents found it difficult to come back to responsibility because they were not used to it. For example, Tanya Kirk stated that the difficulty of having the

responsibility meant that it was hard to remember where her kids were supposed to be and at what times:

Tanya: And when I first came back, you know, trying to get back out of the swing of things, you know, after you're gone and you don't have that responsibility, it's like you come back, it's like, uh, the kids were in soccer or something like that. And it's like I had to call my husband like two or three times one evening and say "you know, now where was this child supposed to be at what time? And what was this?" [laugh]

Interviewer: [laugh]

Tanya: "It's on the board" I said "I'm not at home, where are these kids supposed to be?" [laugh]. So I mean, nothing real major but, yeah.

Even though there was an element of no responsibility among those in prison and those who were deployed, there was always the connection at home that made the distance difficult. Three mothers (two military and one incarcerated) stated that it would have made their time go so much easier if their families would have been with them. However, it was the connection they had with their families during the time away that made their return easier.

Families with incarcerated parents discussed how the return of the family member resulted in closer relationships for every parent/child relationship. Clear et al. (2001) asserted that frequently both spousal and parent/child relationships are strained or severed as a result of incarceration. However, all eleven families claimed that they were closer as a result of the incarceration because the parent began communicating with their families while in prison as in the following example by Jannette Kendrick:

Jannette: Um, before he went to prison, he would, he was on drugs so he would not come home at nights and I was pregnant so I wasn't going with him anywhere. He would stay out all night. Sometimes days at a time and now he doesn't do any drugs and he's, before he went he like wouldn't hold a job or you know stuff like that. And now he keeps a job and when he does get money, he actually helps me now instead of before he wouldn't help. He would get money and just leave and stay gone for days spending his money. Now he's more family oriented.

Jannette Kendrick stated that her husband was more family oriented now because of prison. In fact it got so bad before he went to prison that when Jannette went to prison before he did, he went from motel to motel doing and selling drugs around their children. Jannette could not get in contact with her family the entire year she was in prison. Their children were taken by child protective services while in her husband's care and then when Jannette got out of prison, she fought for them for three months. Then her husband was taken to prison soon after. It was not until he was in prison that Jannette stated he realized the importance of family.

Similarly, Adam Babor claimed that it was not until prison that he began to realize the importance of family. He stated that before prison he used to drop off the Christmas presents for his children and then not even watch the kids open them.

Adam: Mm hmm. You learn to appreciate them. I was taking a lot of stuff for granted. I was out in the streets. And Christmas time would go by and I'd buy them stuff and just drop it off. I wouldn't stay around and help them open it. Drop it off.

Interviewer: So what changed?

Adam: Prison changed me because you know how you just get tired, because this was my second time in prison and it was for the same case. It was just for a probation violation and I just felt like I can't keep doing this.

Adam's statement that he "can't keep doing this" was a statement that was underlying all the incarcerated participants' statements. Particularly, they felt they could not do it because they wanted to be positive role models for their kids. Even if they knew they were not going to do particular actions, their children tended to test them when they returned back into the family.

Regaining Trust

One main theme relating to the incarcerated parents' return was the concept of regaining trust. Children needed to be assured that their parents will not leave them again. And it takes time for children to think that their parent will not leave them. In the following excerpt, Karl Summit expressed for his son's sake how he cannot get in the predicament of going back to prison:

Interviewer: Okay. Uh, if you were to give advice to another parent who was going away, what would you say?

Karl: [laugh] Uh, stay in contact. Think positive. And uh, I don't know. Don't try to get in that predicament ever again. Because I messed up this time and he was like, I went to jail for like a weekend, it wasn't even a weekend, it was a couple of hours and he was like "oh you going back to prison?" and I was like "nah, I'm waiting to be released right now" and he was like "okay."

Interviewer: So he thought instantly you were going back to prison?

Karl: Mm hmm

Interviewer: How did that make you feel?

Karl: Oh man, I was hurt. Then I told him I was getting on house arrest and he was like “aww” he said “you be on house arrest for Christmas?” and I say “yeah, no sledding none of that, no ice skating or none of that”

Karl expressed that because of his actions, his son had to suffer. In addition, he disclosed that he was hurt because his son instantly thought his father was going back to prison. In order for a parent to regain trust, they need to be consistent with their behaviors and their children will test them to see if they are staying true to their words. Testing behaviors were used as active strategies of uncertainty reduction (i.e., seeking information from a third party or manipulating the environment to observe how the partner reacts). A good example of a mother talking about how her daughter tested her came from Ashley Ardon:

Ashley: The other day um, they [children] came over here and GH one of my old friends and he used to be a crack head, you know and she was searching through stuff and I didn't understand. You know, she was going through the closet. She goes in my room, and there is this big shelf, she says “has this been moved?” and I was like “no why?” I didn't get it at first but she was searching for stuff. And then I come out here and the phone cord was stuck in the drawer so I knew she had been in the desk. She was looking around. She wants me to be whole again.

Interviewer: So she was searching for?

Ashley: Yeah, any evidence of smoking crack. Me and my mom started cracking up and it was like “Julie.” How did she think of that, what was in her head to think? Well, 'cuz mommy was talking to GH or whatever and then I was doing it.

And she didn't want me to be doing it. She would have called me out on it too I'm sure. If she would have found something, it would have been over. It would have been over. She's a very gung ho kid. [laugh]

Ashley talked about how her daughter wants her to be "whole again" and so she went into detail how her daughter searched all through her stuff. Her daughter had answered the phone and received a phone call from GH, an old "crack head" friend of her mom's and she instantly thought her mom was smoking crack. Her daughter's actions illustrate the persistence that children use to reduce their uncertainties that their parent is doing something wrong. Ashley's daughter probably the most blatant out of any parent's description of their children's testing behaviors. Most of the time, the children will ask questions to reduce their uncertainties as in Ruth Crawley's following description about her children:

Ruth: But it was just like they were testing me to see if any old behaviors was coming out. Kids will test parents just a simple way if you told them that you were going to take them to the clothing store and you are two hours late or take them to the grocery store or you go the next day. How they uh "what we going to do today?" "Are we going to do this thing?" Or sit the magazine in front of you and say this sweater looks good all the little different inscriptions that you chewed up and I'm like "okay." So that was that. And then my oldest daughter, she would come in from work and make sure you know what's going on. So I have to accept their unawareness or their fears. Their fears about what mommy's going to do today. "Is mommy going to be stressed out?" "We don't want to stress mommy out." And I have to relieve them of the situation.

Interviewer: Okay.

Ruth: And it's just understanding that they don't have to do that do that anymore.

They don't have to worry about momma trying to do the wrong thing. Mommy wants to get a job. Which I get, I like doing taxes. But the aspects being true to your child keep the communication open.

Ruth talked about how her children asked questions to make sure she was not going somewhere she was not supposed to go or doing something she was not supposed to be doing. She stated that she had to reassure them that she wants to change and wants to get a job and it just takes time for them to realize that they can start trusting again.

In general, whether they were children of incarcerated or military parents, they went through a stressful time. All but two of the children interviewed said that they were sad when their parent left and some expressed how it was the hardest thing they've ever had to do.

Role Changes

Even though it was difficult, for the children who were old enough to understand that their parents were gone, they tended to take on an adult role and help around the house. One child interviewed who was sixteen at the time his mother left, claimed that he had to take care of his siblings when his mother was in prison. He disclosed that he would steal money and items while his mother was in prison.

Philip: This last time uh, she cut house arrest, I know she actually left the house and it cost her three years. At the time I was probably 16. All it makes you do is grow up a lot faster because my dad works so much and I was always home watching my other brothers and sisters.

Interviewer: Oh really. Are you the oldest?

Philip: No my older brother, he's been in and out of jail too.

Interviewer: You said you took care of your younger siblings. What did you do to take care of them?

Philip: If I had to get them stuff, I would go get it regardless if I had money or not.

Interviewer: Really?

Philip: Make sure they had stuff

Interviewer: If you didn't have money, would you?

Philip: Yeah, I'd take it.

Philip's family was a classic case of habitual offenders with parents teaching their children ways to survive that is against the law. Both of Philip's parents have been married to each other for years but they have also been incarcerated many times. Just before the interview, Philip came from a court hearing because he was in trouble with the law. What is relevant to this study though was his statement that he felt he had to take on the parental responsibility and provide for his younger siblings. And the only way he knew how to provide was to steal for them.

All the other children interviewed took on parental responsibilities in different ways that were not against the law. In a discussion about her son, Kathleen Babor stated that her son symbolically stepped up as the "man of the house" when his father was gone.

Kathleen: Yep, he the man the house. He said "momma can I be the man of the house when he's not here?" So, yeah, so he stood charge and I didn't have to take out the trash, I didn't have to start my car, none of that. So he did that.

Interview: So when Adam got out, did he still keep that same mentality?

Kathleen: Um, sometimes like today I just had to get on him about “you’re not going to get any more allowance because you don’t take out the trash, you don’t sweep the kitchen floor, and stuff like that and what happened?” And he just says “I don’t know” but he be feeling like that’s Adam’s job now.

Kathleen stated that the role her son took on as “man of the house” switched back to where they used to be when his father came back into the household. Kathleen felt that her son thought that it was his father’s job now that he is home so he has dismissed that responsibility.

Some characteristic responsibilities that children managed were things such as doing chores around the house. Myrna Gentry, a nine year old, spoke of taking care of everyone once her dad went overseas because her mom broke her back and her older sister got in a car wreck. So she stated “I had to take care of everybody...like fixing food and stuff and I tried to keep the house clean...and I gave them their medicine.”

Every single child interviewed talked about helping around the house and trying to take care of their family while their parent was away. For example, one fourteen year old child, Caitlin who was twelve at the time of her mother’s departure to prison expressed how she took on a babysitting job to send her mother money while she was in prison. And when the parent came back, they took on the role they had prior to their parent leaving but they had to do so through re-negotiation. Caitlin for example expressed in her interview how she did not clean and do things around the house like she did when her mother was gone.

Re-negotiation of Family Dynamics

Families have to negotiate a balanced equilibrium or a balance between change and stability and re-negotiate once the parent returns back into the family. Drummet et al. (2002) claimed that a common misconception is that the difficulty of separation is instantaneously overcome when the parent returns home. However, there are issues of roles and boundaries, household management (e.g., people may not want to relinquish their duties or feelings of unfamiliarity with management may increase tension), honeymoon effects (e.g., reunion is often romanticized and can create too high of expectations), social support (e.g., family members may withdraw from social support to normalize daily life), children may reject or be anxious about their parent's return or their physical and mental condition. Similar to military, incarcerated individuals also have a difficult time returning to the household. Strained relationships with the family are undeniable aspects of imprisonment. Both of these military and incarcerated families experienced many of the same symptoms that Drummet et al. described in their description of military families. Regaining responsibility, role changes, and regaining trust appeared to be the three main relational qualities that permeated these relationships upon the return of the parents.

A common theme among the re-entry of parents is the idea of re-negotiating their relationships. Regaining responsibility, roles changes, and regaining trust appeared to be the three main ways in which they re-negotiated their relationships. In other words, they had to re-evaluate each other at the same time that they become more involved with each other's lives. All these relational qualities had to be negotiated again after the parent's absence. Basically the family system changes to a single parent family once one parent

leaves and children feel an ambiguous loss once the parent leaves. However, the dynamics change when the parent returns and they basically have to re-negotiate the balance. Aside from separation, there are not many cases in relationships in which patterns are negotiated, discontinued, and then re-negotiated. While negotiation/re-negotiation is a common process within relationships since any change in a relationship involves re-negotiation, this research is within the context of a relational continuity that has rarely been focused on in past research.

Past communication research according to Martin (1986) about relationships in transition has been devoted to the role of communication in developing relationships from theoretical perspectives such as the social penetration theory and/or deteriorating relationships. Martin claimed that most theorists have identified stages or dimensions of communication as relationships increase or decrease in intimacy. Additionally, Martin asserted that further research is needed to discover the dimension of communication change in ongoing relationships, specifically in periods of transition. This research begins the process of examining relationships in transition.

Re-negotiation of responsibilities, roles changes, and trust was complicated by the expectations that families held prior to the parent coming home. Drummet et al. (2002) stated that honeymoon effects (e.g. reunion is often romanticized and can create too high of expectations) often affect military reunions. However this study also found that it can complicate reunions of incarcerated parents and their families as well. In the following excerpt, Louis Wayman talked about how he did not know what to expect after being away for four years.

Louis: That first week I was. I really didn't. Like I said I was, I didn't really know how to act around them. But they are some great kids and they make it easy for me. My oldest one, she's kind of stubborn... Well, at first I more or less observed them. You know, I'm not going to actually say I was scared to talk to them but I didn't know what to expect. I know they are getting older and I just wanted to see their level of education and how they would act around me. And once I did, I could act accordingly. So I more or less had to analyze them first.

Louis stated how he had to analyze his children before he could act on being a parent. This symbolizes the idea of starting over again. Most continuing relationships do not have the element of *starting over*. Rather, they must re-negotiate a change in their life cycle, such as a birth in the family or a death in the family. However, these military and incarcerated families more or less simulate a family that had two parents separate from their marriage or even divorce with amicable terms and still communicate while one parent leaves the family and then the parents eventually get back together.

These families had expectations that everything would be cohesive once the parent returned home. However, this only made re-negotiation more difficult. In the following excerpt, Tim Rawling discussed what it was like coming home with the expectation that he would take on the role he had when he left:

Interviewer: Uh, after you were away for good, can you describe for me what it was like to come back into the family?

Tim: Uh, it was a little difficult because as far as my wife was concerned, my wife was used to handling everything. And I think there was some friction at first as far as me coming back and filling the shoes. Uh, there was probably some

communication problems because I was just ready to jump right back in and pick up where I had left off. And she had established her own way of doing things.

Tim claimed that communication problems existed between himself and his wife because he thought he could pick up where he had left off. However, one of the main issues that impacted their re-negotiation process was the idea that they were living two separate lives while co-existing in a continuing relationship while the parent was away. The parents and children at home *and* the parent away were given some independence when the parent left and this often made it difficult to re-negotiate.

Living practically separate lives while the parent was away made it difficult to re-negotiate which can be explained through the relational dialectic lens. The re-negotiation of coming back together resembles the relational dialectic issue of balancing the contradictory tension between autonomy and connection (Baxter, 1994). They feel the pull of what it was like when the parent was away with the push of trying to re-establish connection when the parent returns. In the following, Joanna Keeley discussed how frustrating it was for her to re-negotiate her role as the single mother to another role as a married mother once her husband returned.

Joanna: At times it gets frustrating. You know, 'cuz I'm so, I'd been for 16 months just doing what I want when I want. You know, I really, the only two people I've had to worry about has been me and my daughter. So now it's like, okay I want to do this, but okay, but I know that Mark has a hockey game at night but I want to go out and hang out with my girlfriends or you know. So it gets frustrating, but I guess as time goes on, it won't be as frustrating.

In order to re-negotiate the newfound responsibilities, role changes, and trust issues, some participants mentioned that time was needed. Joanna claimed that she thought as time went on, it would not be as frustrating for her to balance the dialectic between autonomy and connection. Even for veteran military families who had been through many transitions there was an adjustment period according to Sheila Grant in the following excerpt:

Sheila: Um, we've been together and apart so many times, but reality is there is an adjustment. There is an adjustment with now whose back in charge, I'm used to my schedule, and I'm used to what I'm going to cook for dinner. You know, I mean, there, it's a total change. Um, we were trying to prepare the younger soldiers and their wives for what it was going to be like. But for the two of us, we were like, it's old hat, we know this is the way it's going to be. And I spent more time I think trying to prepare the kids for how things would be, um, I think I was a little uncertain to know really how he would be. What, how has he been affected by what he's been through. You know, not questioning our family ties, but they were different men when they'd come home than when they went. Just because of the experiences they have.

Interviewer: Mm hmm.

Sheila: Um, but for us, the first week he was home, and I would say probably the first month, but truly the first week, I felt like we were newlyweds. It felt like nothing could go wrong. I mean with the kids, with him, uh, I think at first he had a little bit of a hard time reprimanding the kids because he didn't want to be the

bad guy. And I was ready to release. I was ready for him to take over. But it just seemed to work.

Sheila claimed that her relationship with her husband was like being a newlywed all over again for at least a month after his return home. The description of their relationship was similar to other participants' experiences. These participants had been apart so long that their relational patterns discontinued in a relationship that never ceased to exist. This is an interesting concept to examine because most research has been done on relationships that either discontinue or grow in intimacy, not ones that continue with discontinued patterns and then continue with patterns that must be re-negotiated.

As Sheila mentioned and as other participant's also mentioned, it was like they were newlyweds again so it was like they were starting over again. In the following excerpt, Amy Hallman describes what it was like when her husband came home from prison:

Amy: He's been home four months now. He came back in August.

Interviewer: Tell me about the four months.

Amy: Interesting. [laugh]

Interviewer: Really? How so?

Amy: It really has been interesting. Um learning one another all over again...Like learning the foods he like, learning what he don't and do like, this has been interesting. Um, watching him with the children has been fun. Taking his authority back. And him going to work and doing what he's supposed to do and how it was done before he left...Okay and so I feel he's doing a little struggling on his own trying to readjust, trying to get his life back in order. I had, um, there's

been a few times where I had to go to the church or go to a sanctuary place to stop and rethink what's going on here and what you need to do here. I say to myself "you used to taking control" and so that's been a challenge for me. But I'm learning everyday.

Amy discussed that part of her re-negotiation was letting go of some of her control. She felt a tension between openness and closedness because she wanted to tell him what she was going through and the troubles she was having. However she felt that her husband was going through a rough time readjusting so she tried to keep her troubles to herself. What happens when one does not keep to themselves and tries to push the re-negotiation process too quickly was evident in Kathleen Babor's description of her husband's return home from prison:

Interviewer: Okay. Um, what was it like then when he came back into the family?

Kathleen: Um it was real different because you always going to have your ups and downs. And it was like when he was locked up, we were doing real good because you're not arguing because you're not there. And then when he came home, it was, and I guess it was more or less me because I like nitpicked with him, "what's this on the floor?" and stuff like that. And um, he didn't like that. But it was just me and Leon for that whole time he was gone, so that's all I knew. Like Leon didn't ever leave anything on the floor but basically we were never at home because I worked two jobs. But when Adam came home, if he left something on the floor, I would go crazy on him. And so when I noticed our marriage was coming to an end because of that, then I knew I had to restrain.

Interviewer: Really? So you think you were more demanding because you knew what you had in mind when he was gone. So how long did it take you to realize that it was kind of destroying your marriage?

Kathleen: It took me three weeks, he left me for three weeks. And during those three weeks, I knew then I was like, I basically changed my whole attitude.

Interviewer: And that was because of all the negative communication?

Kathleen: Yeah. He said I always every comment was negative. He don't like making the bed and that really bothers me. And he still don't but it took for him to leave me for me to let it go and I'll just make it myself. But he hates making the bed and I'm like okay, I'll just basically leave it alone because I did it so much when he was locked up so I may as well just continue to do it.

Kathleen's husband left her for three weeks after he returned from prison because he said that she expected too much of him. Kathleen stated that she was used to doing things on her own when he was gone and then when he returned and did abide by her accustomed ways, she nagged him and he left. Therefore, in their re-negotiation process, Kathleen had to give up what worked with her and her son and change her expectations with her husband.

As stated earlier during the pre-separation and separation discussion, these families utilized methods to re-establish balance when the parent departed because the transitions disturbed their equilibrium. During the parental return, the roles tended to shift back to what they were comfortable with before the parent had left.

The role changes were evident while the parent was away and many of the children took on parental roles. However, they tended to shift back to their old roles when

their parents returned back into the family. Even though their behaviors illustrated they were back into their old roles, the parents spoke of their children growing mature and independent during their time away. However, even if they were independent, they still needed to be assured that their parents will not leave them again and used testing behaviors. Only the incarcerated parent's children used testing behaviors which was one of the differences between incarcerated and military families. There are major differences and similarities between these two types of distal families which is discussed in the next section.

Research Question Four

The fourth research question asked what the similarities and differences were between distal military and incarcerated parents and their families. The main difference between the two types of families was their children's well-being. Their well-being is the first thing that is discussed in this section. Second there is a discussion on the similarities and differences in general that have been written about in the prior sections.

Children's Well-Being.

Past research on military and incarcerated families have provided inconsistent findings regarding the well-being of children. The children of incarcerated parents in this study exhibited more behavior problems at home or in school than military children in this study while their parent was gone.

This study found that four out of the twelve military families had children with problems such as depression and/or disciplinary problems at home or school. Three out of the four families had with military mothers who deployed. Neil, a thirteen year old son at the time his father was deployed, had a depression problem because his father was in a

hostile environment and the son attended twelve military funerals at home with his mom while his dad was fighting in Iraq. In addition, Neil had to attend his best friend's father's funeral so it hit close to home that Neil could possibly lose his own father at some point. In the following excerpt, Bob talks about how his son, Neil, had a difficult time because of the funerals he had to attend.

Bob: They [children] didn't want me to go, but both of them handled it pretty well. They're both pretty strong kids. The daughter probably better than the son, but he knew more about it. When they really started having problems, and you will probably be able to discuss this with my wife more, was when soldiers started dying.

Interviewer: Oh.

Bob: You know, being injured, severely injured. 'Cuz the regimen I was in, we fought inside [towns]. The hot spots for 7 months.

Interviewer: Wow.

Bob: So we lost 12 and had over 120 injured. So it was pretty rough fighting over there. And it probably got harder on my son, like a kid he went to school with, his dad was killed. He played football with him. His dad was killed in an attack. So he'd seen a lot, he went to a lot of funerals.

Bob talked about how his son had to attend many military funerals. His son had an uncertainty that his own father may not return home. This caused Neil to go into a depression. Only two other military parents mentioned being in hostile environments but they did not mention any deaths that occurred in their unit.

The other three military children with problems had deployed mothers. Two of these families went through a lot of change during the separation. The other family had a son whose mother said he was depressed when she left and his symptoms were similar to when his mother and father got divorced. In the following excerpt, the mother speaks of his depression:

Interviewer: Did you talk about anything in particular?

Debbie: He would ask how things were where I was, he didn't want to talk about school very much. He would talk about what he was doing. His grades, he seemed pretty distracted I mean he was still in grade school at the time so yeah he seemed to have longer periods of adjustment. Like um, he would be distracted or get bored and I don't know if it was just depression. But um, his performance was below while I was gone I think.

Interviewer: Did you know that while you were gone?

Debbie: Um, no I didn't know that, I suspected. I think because of the divorce we kind of knew what it meant for him to be depressed. But kind of expected it would happen.

Interviewer: Really? You say because of the divorce?

Debbie: Well, we've had experience with him being depressed and how that would affect his grades.

Interviewer: Okay, so he was like that before and these were similar type of actions that he did?

Debbie: Right.

Debbie's son had the symptoms of depression that he had when his parents got divorced. Symptoms included that his grades dropped and he was more withdrawn. According to Debbie, his depression directly resulted from his mother being away. Although there was not a direct threat on her safety like there was with Bob Grant, this illustrates that Debbie's son may have been uncertain about his mother's return.

The evidence that children of incarcerated parents had behavior problems was more obvious than those children in military families. In over half of the families interviewed, parental separation negatively affected the child's well-being while the parent was in prison. For example, Leon Babor, a seven year old, had problems in school when his father left. Both his mother and father discussed how he acted up in the following two excerpts.

Interviewer: Right. Um, acting up, why do you think he was acting up?

Kathleen: Because his father wasn't there.

Interviewer: Really? Did he tell you that?

Kathleen: No. He just said he didn't know why he acts the way he acts.

Interviewer: Okay, but you know?

Kathleen: Mm hmm. And I think Adam was gone so long that he had got to the point where he did it all the time. He just stopped acting up in school like three weeks ago. So he just stopped.

Kathleen claimed that their son started acting up when his father left for prison and just stopped three weeks prior to the interview which was nearly a year after Adam returned. She did not have an explanation for her son acting up when her husband returned home, but Adam had an explanation in the following excerpt:

Interviewer: Okay. Cool. Um, when you came home into back into the family, what was that like?

Adam: Oh, it was rough. Uh, at first it was rough. He started acting up in school.

Interviewer: When you came back home?

Adam: Yeah.

Interviewer: Why do you think that was?

Adam: I have no clue. Probably just a change...I mean at home he was fine. But at school it was bad.

Interviewer: Really?

Adam: Yeah but then I guess it was a way for me to start coming to the school to interact in his classroom because I started going to the school probably once every two weeks, eat lunch with him or whatever and it got better.

Interviewer: Really?

Adam: Mm hmm.

So Adam thought that his son was acting up in school when his father returned home so he could get his father to come to the school. The following example offers a child's perspective why she thinks she acted up in school. Once her mother left for prison, fourteen-year-old Caitlin Frank began acting up in school and she explained why she thinks she did.

Interviewer: Were you ever mad at your mom?

Caitlin: Yeah I'd, I felt that I used to be bad, like when she was gone I would be real bad. I mean, I wasn't myself.

Interviewer: Really?

Caitlin: Mm hmm

Interviewer: Why do you think you were bad?

Caitlin: I don't know, I just, I started acting up a lot. I'd get in trouble all the time. But before mom was in, I mean I never got in trouble at all.

Interviewer: Okay. What about now, do you get in trouble now?

Caitlin: I have been, but not. I mean, I was, and then I've been slowing down in it like I don't know. It feels I don't know it feels weird but I don't know if I'm back or whatever.

Interviewer: Do you think you're back to yourself?

Caitlin: No

Interviewer: No, okay. Do you think you will be?

Caitlin: Yeah.

Interviewer: When do you think that will be?

Caitlin: I don't know, it will take a while I think.

Interviewer: Really?

Caitlin: Uh huh. Until I know she won't go again.

Interviewer: Okay so you're afraid that she will go again?

Caitlin: Mm hmm.

Caitlin talked about how she never got in trouble before her mom left and there was a significant change once her mom was in prison. Caitlin began acting up in school while her mother was in prison and continued after her mother returned. Caitlin explained that she was acting up until she could trust that her mom was not going to leave her again.

The uncertainty of losing their parents again created avenues for them to act out. Acting out may have been a way to express that they were unhappy.

Acting out may have also occurred because they were envious of their friends. In the following example, Stephen Furl, a twelve year old whose mother had been incarcerated many years of his life, gave a reason why he acted out:

Stephen: It was like, it bothered me, 'cuz like some of my friends they'd be like "man I get to go do this with my mom, I get to go do that with my mom" but I had my auntie and she is like my mom. She was like my mom so. It was like, I knew my mom was coming home but it was like in third grade, uh, I had the trouble because in third grade I started really understanding that my mom was gone. And I knew she was coming back but I knew she was gone though in third grade. And I got in trouble 'cuz I used to be mad when people started talking about their moms. I used to go and shut down.

Interviewer: Really? You would shut down?

Stephen: Mm hmm.

Interviewer: Okay, would you get mad at other people?

Stephen: Yeah, I just, I just get so mad and walk away.

Interviewer: Really? They would talk about their own moms?

Stephen: Yeah, they'd be like "I'm going to do this with my mom, I'm going to do that with my mom" and then they would be talking about their mom and I'd be like "don't take that for granted."

Stephen discussed how his friends talked about their mothers and how he would be upset because he did not have his mother around. In third grade he got upset because he

thought they were taking their mothers for granted. Stephen's mother had been incarcerated many times in his life and this last time was the longest period he had been without his mother. He spoke of how he learned to appreciate her because she was gone and when his friends began talking about their mothers, he became jealous because they had mothers and he did not. He also became angry because in third grade, when he should have been learning cursive writing, he was mad that his friends were talking down about their mothers. He was mad because he did not even have his mother around and none of his friends knew what it was like to not have a mother around.

Interestingly, most children acted out in school and all the children that were interviewed except for the Crawley children stated that they did not tell their friends at school that their parents were incarcerated. The literature review discussed stigmas in relation to incarceration and this may have been a reason why children did not want to tell their friends. Therefore, they may have felt alone at school and acting out was a way to show others they were unhappy without actually telling them why.

Similarities and Differences Discussed Throughout Chapter Four

It was obvious that the absence had some affect on their children's well being, especially incarcerated parent's children. In general, there were many similarities and differences discussed throughout the first three sections.

The first section discussed the communication that was used before the parent separated from the family. I found that five out of the twelve military families actually communicated about the leave beforehand but none of the eleven incarcerated families did so. However, a similarity between the two types of families was the desire not to speak about the leave because they were uncertain of what the future held. Both types of

families knew of a pending leave for different reasons. The military families knew of a possible leave because of the war and the parents were either career military members or they were a part of the reserves. The families with incarcerated parents had some idea that the parent may leave because the parent was not an active parent and participating in illegal activities.

The second section discussed the communication that was used once the parent separated from the family. The families had many similarities in the way that they communicated because military members were usually limited in their phone calls and incarcerated families did not have the money to accept many phone calls. A reliable form of communication for military was the use of Internet, but families with incarcerated parents could not e-mail because the parents could not use Internet in prison. The most reliable form of communication for incarcerated families was postal mail which was also utilized and appreciated by military families. However, it took a long time to set up camp when military parents were overseas so postal mail was unreliable for a few months after first arriving.

In terms of emotional climate discussed in the second section, there were similarities and differences in the way that families maintained their emotional climate. For closeness the two types of families used positivity, assurances, and cognitive processes characterizing association. However, a difference in the types of closeness was in the use of assurances. Although both types of families discussed looking forward to the future as type of assurance, only the military families mentioned methods they used for counting down the days. In addition, the families with incarcerated parents used

assurances in a way that the military families did not because they had to prove and assure their family that they were doing well in prison.

The largest similarity in the way that these families managed their emotional climate was how they mentioned distancing themselves in terms of using cognitive dissociation. Some distal parents mentioned that in order to survive in prison or overseas they needed to put their families out of their minds. Additionally, the families at home also talked about putting their distal parents out of their mind. They discussed using specific behaviors to keep themselves busy to get their minds off the distal relationship. Avoidance was a distancing technique that was a difference between the two families. Two incarcerated parents used avoidance techniques by not calling their families for a period of time so that when they called, their families were wondering why they did not call. This type of avoidance made them feel wanted.

The third research question addressed the communication that was used once the parents returned back into their homes. The return of a family member was difficult to manage for all the families. Even though some of the distal incarcerated and military parents mentioned how much easier it was when they were away, they felt connected to their families and it made it difficult to be away. Once they were back into the families, the parents mentioned that a common difficulty was facing responsibilities. Regaining trust was a difference found between the two types of families. The incarcerated parents had to prove to their children that they would not leave them again so the children used testing behaviors such as checking to see if drugs were in their drawers. There were also role changes when the parent returned home. But the main similarity was the fact that all the children discussed helping out their parents at home while the other parent was gone.

Once the parent returned, the children returned back to their original role they had once the parent left.

In general, there were many similarities and differences. It is important to note that some of the similarities and differences may have been attributed to race and income. The most common race for military families that were interviewed was Caucasian with only one African American family interviewed and the average income was 33,000-55,000 per year. The most common race for incarcerated parents and their families was African American with three Caucasian families and the average income was 12,000-31,000. However, even though there was a difference in terms of race and income, it would be difficult to distinguish how much race or income impacted the similarities and/or differences because that question was not asked.

Summary

This chapter addressed four research questions regarding military and incarcerated parental absences. The first research question asked what communication was used before the parent left. No communication about the parental absence, communication about the parental absence, and transition planning were three themes that addressed the first research question.

The second research question asked what communication was used once the parent left. The two major themes used to address the second research question were the use of maintenance behaviors and what the families did to manage their emotional climate. Specifically, the description on maintenance behaviors contained sub-themes of phone, postal mail, e-mail and other alternative ways to communicate, and visits. The description of emotional climate illustrated how families used positivity, assurances,

cognitive processes characterizing association, cognitive dissociation, disengagement, and avoidance to help reduce and manage uncertainties while the parent was away from their families.

The third research question asked what communication was used once the parents returned to the families. This research question was addressed by talking about the responsibilities parents faced when returning back into the family, how incarcerated parents had to regain trust, and the role changes that occurred once the returned back into the family.

The fourth research question asked what the differences were between incarcerated parents and their families and military families. The description in this part of the chapter discussed children well-being and summarized the similarities and differences that were talked about within the first three sections.

CHAPTER FIVE: Discussion

Chapter five is divided into four sections. The first section addresses implications of this study for theory and research on personal and family relationships. In the second section, there are some practical applications of this study's findings. The third section highlights some strengths and limitations of this study, and the last section points out productive directions for future research.

Implications

This section argues that this study is relevant for communication and family studies scholars because it advances theory and research in personal relationships. To support the claim, the section is divided into four parts. The first part illustrates how communication is a necessary component and can be a form of survival in distal relationships. The second segment illustrates how this study advances communication scholarship by showing evidence of how distancing can be functional and in what ways. The third part discusses how the findings on the emotional climate advanced our understanding of what happens when families become too close or too distant. Finally, in the last segment, new insight for maintenance literature is illustrated by showing how this study incorporates previous maintenance strategies and adds new strategies particular to these types of relationships.

Communication and meaning. This study illustrates the important interrelationship between communication and the construction of meaning. Specifically, communication provided an avenue for families to feel a purpose in life. Some distal parents discussed how communication helped them get through their time away from their families and for some, it meant survival. Especially for individuals in prison who

feel out of touch with the outside world, receiving communication in the form of letters, pictures, or drawings, can give them hope and something to look forward to. Many incarcerated parents discussed how important communication was with their families and embedded in their statements was the message that communication was a form of survival for them. Anthony Hallman was quoted as saying the following about communication with his family: “It felt good, I mean, that’s what you live for there [prison]. I mean, if not, you get caught up in the system.” The communication for Anthony gave him a meaning and a way to survive the system and make it through so he could go back to his family.

The idea of survival falls in line with the writings of Viktor E. Frankl, who endured years in Nazi death camps. In his book, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (first written in 1959 and most recently revised in 1984), Frankl wrote about his survival and talked about the theory that he developed that helped him explain how and why he survived. The basis for Frankl’s theory is the belief that people’s primary motivational force is their search for meaning. Frankl’s poignant discussion of Nazi camps has an important implication for those in prison. Frankl discussed that a person can get used to any situation and as Hallman stated, if a family does not contact a person in prison, they will get caught up in the system. In other words, individuals can get their meaning many things like love, their work, family, etc. and if a prisoner achieves meaning through their family, their family can give them motivation, energy and the will to move on. However, if they do not receive anything from their family, a prisoner may lose meaning altogether or select other avenues to find meaning that are more detrimental to their well-being. Frankl declared the following about how one survives by being connected to others:

By declaring that man is responsible and must actualize the potential meaning of his life, I wish to stress that true meaning of life is to be discovered in the world rather than within man or his own psyche, as though it were a closed system. I have termed this constitutive characteristic “the self-transcendence of human existence.” It denotes the fact that being human always points, and is directed, to something, or someone, other than oneself – be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself – by giving himself to a cause to serve or another person to love – the more human he is and the more he actualizes himself (p. 133).¹

Frankl mentioned how one has to have meaning to survive and that meaning denotes loving someone or even something else besides himself. Once they lose that connection and focus on the self, the meaning and will to make it through has been lost. This would be the reason why those in prison, and even in the military, need to stay connected with family and friends so they remain focused on their meaning for survival and well-being.

Communication is how we make meaning and the act of communication could give a person meaning or a purpose in life. Referring back to the statement that Anthony Hallman made about letters in prison, there is an important implication about communication in general when he mentioned how the other prisoners who had not received mail for five or six years wanted to see his pictures. This was a powerful statement because it implies that they wanted to cling on to the hope that there is life outside the prison walls. When individuals are in prison for too long, families often give up on them and stop communicating and this can cause individuals in prison to lose hope and not know what their purpose is.

Role and importance of distance. A few scholars (e.g., Hess, 2002; Ryder & Bartle, 1991) have argued that appropriate distancing is a vital element in healthy relationship maintenance, but prior to this study there was little evidence of how distancing can be functional and in what ways. This study provides support for that claim, and suggests some ways in which distance can be good for a relationship. In addition, in his research, Hess found that individuals used distancing in relationships with disliked partners as well as liked partners. Research was not found that has examined the distancing behaviors used in families with a distal parent/child relationship. Therefore, the finding that these families mainly used three characteristics of distancing (i.e., cognitive dissociation, disengagement, and avoidance) is an important aspect of this research.

This study found that families and distal parents need to distance themselves somewhat so they can also survive the time apart. The most prevalent and widely mentioned concept throughout all the interviews was the idea of using some type of cognitive dissociation to get through their time. Cognitive dissociation is defined as disregarding a message, derogating the other person, and/or cognitive and emotional detachment (Hess, 2002). The family members did not use cognitive dissociation to disregard a message or derogate the other person. They used cognitive dissociation to cognitively and emotionally detach themselves. Out of all the families interviewed, there were only two that did not mention using this. The families that did use cognitive dissociation did so by putting their family member out of their mind but used an actual behavior to put their family member out of their mind by “keeping busy.”

This study found that cognitive dissociation is necessary because if they don't use this technique, individuals could think about their parents/spouses to the point of depression. Jacky Hart disclosed that she thought about her husband all the time and it was to the point that she wanted to kill herself. For both the distal parent and the families at home, cognitive dissociation was an appropriate method to use to help them focus on where they were at the time. Usually when asked what advice they would give other individuals who were going to go through this, the children and the parents mentioned that it helped them to get their mind off their family member/s. They mentioned specific behaviors to get their mind off the separation by keeping busy with housework, extracurricular activities for children, getting involved in work, and not talking about their distal family member.

Cognitive and emotional detachment were ways for both families at home and distal parents to maintain their relationships and cope with being away or having a parent being away. This finding advances distancing literature because it provides evidence that these types of relationships use distancing for the good of the relationship. What needs to be noted is that although distancing is healthy in these relationships, too much can be detrimental. Some incarcerated participants talked about how they saw fellow inmates lose hope when they did not receive letters or pictures. What may have happened to those prisoners who did not receive any letters is that their family and friends took cognitive dissociation to an extreme without trying to use closeness techniques to balance it out.

Avoidance was used as a way to feel close in this situation, and this supports the idea that distancing techniques should not always be regarded as just being used to create distance in a relationship (Hess, 2002). Rather, this research illustrates that distancing

behaviors should be viewed as those which help create balance between the closeness and distance continuum. In addition, if there is too much closeness, distancing techniques need to be used to balance out the emotional climate.

Emotional climate. Perhaps the most important contribution to this research is the finding that these military and incarcerated parents and their children maintained their relationships and reduced their uncertainties by managing the emotional climate and how they did this is equally important. Individuals usually define a relationship by describing the emotional climate and how close they are. However, family systems theory indicates that distance needs to be regulated or families may become dysfunctional with too much closeness or too much distance. Because the correct balance of closeness and distance is needed in families it was necessary to examine the aspect of physical separation and how separation effects distance regulation.

When the equilibrium is thrown off balance due to such things as a parental leave, uncertainty occurs. Uncertainty can be reduced and/or managed by using closeness and distancing techniques. This research found that families balanced the equilibrium of closeness and distance by using positivity, assurances, and cognitive processes characterizing association as closeness techniques and cognitive dissociation, disengagement, and avoidance as distancing techniques. The implication for the techniques used for balancing the emotional climate meant that families who became too close or too distant experienced unhealthy outcomes.

Balancing the emotional climate of closeness and distance is similar to concept of balancing tensions found with the relational dialectical theory (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Although relational dialectical theory was not the lens used to examine these distal

parent/child relationships, there was evidence that tensions existed. The tensions between openness/closeness, connectedness/separateness, and certainty/uncertainty (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) were prevalent throughout the participants' responses and they should be examined in further research.

Maintenance strategies. The participants in this study used a mix of communication strategies and emotional climate management to maintain their relationships. In order of usage, the communication strategies used by military parents and their children were phone, e-mails/instant messenger, letter/cards/pictures/drawings, gifts, alternative ways to communicate (i.e., videoconferencing, webcam, etc), and visits. Incarcerated parents and children communicated by letters/cards/pictures/drawings first and foremost, and then phone calls, sending gifts, and then visits. However those in prison did not have access to the Internet so they could not use e-mail or instant messenger. In addition, these participants managed their emotional climate by using positivity, assurances, cognitive processes characterizing association, cognitive dissociation, disengagement, and avoidance as cognitive strategies to manage their emotional climate.

The results from this study indicated that these distal parents and their children maintained their relationships by utilizing a portion of the maintenance strategies established by past relationship researchers. Relationship researchers have primarily used Stafford and Canary (1991) and Canary et al.'s (1993) maintenance strategies (i.e., positivity, openness, assurances, use of social networks, sharing tasks, joint activities, cards/letters/phone calls, avoidance, antisocial, and humor) in their research (e.g., Dainton et al., 1994).

This study advances the maintenance literature by illustrating that participants maintained their relationships by using a set of communication strategies and by managing their emotional climate with three closeness techniques and three distancing techniques. The separation of the two (i.e., communication strategies and emotional climate) is important because past maintenance and long distance researchers (e.g., Canary et al., 1993; Stafford & Canary, 1991; Westefeld & Liddell, 1982) have combined them when listing their maintenance strategies and it is important to distinguish between the two. Past researchers have clumped together the techniques to manage the emotional climate (i.e., the techniques used for managing closeness and distance) with the actual communication strategies (i.e., phone calls, Internet, etc). Future research should distinguish between the two when examining relational maintenance.

The implication for these results illustrates the need for further examination of maintenance strategies used in personal relationships. It was evident that these parent/child distal relationships used maintenance behaviors that were different from those of other types of relationships. However, further examination of the maintenance strategies used in different types of distal relationships is warranted.

Practical Applications

In the following section, I argue how this study can be applicable to other researchers and to society in general. Specifically, this section is divided into two parts. In the first part, I discuss how these families managed their relationships by minimizing the effects of change. In the second part, I argue how this study can offer benefits to society.

Minimizing the effects of change. Those families that had been through separations before spoke of ways that they communicated pre-separation by trying to minimize the effects of change for their children and for the families in general. Parents can do this by coming up with a transition plan, using creative communication, and consistent communication.

Transition planning was found to be effective among families that used it. This research found that without proper training or if the families had not experienced a parental absence before the current one, families would not know what to expect and would not know what to discuss beforehand. Five out of the twelve military parents had experienced an absence prior to the current one and expressed how communication prior to the leave is important. In fact, the first time that Mark Keeley deployed, he rarely communicated with his kids while he was gone and his marriage failed. Mark stated that he did not communicate about the leave before he left. But the second time he deployed, Mark explicitly laid everything out for his kids like when he was going to call, how they were going to communicate, what he expected of them, etc.

Some ideas pertinent to these families which could be transferred to other types of distal families were the types of planning used. First, there is a need for some type of plan for the children. This study found that the well-being of children in this study was negatively affected when they went through too many changes. Having a parent leave for a period of time is enough stress on children and then adding additional changes creates an unbalance that makes it difficult for children. So parents should come up with ways that their children can be comfortable once the parent leaves. A good example of minimizing change came from the Johnson family where the son and his mother went to

live with the grandparents two months prior to his mother's absence. This helped her son get used to the place he would be living so he would not have to deal with a move on top of his mother leaving.

Along with preparing for the children, preparation should also occur for the parents at home. The parents at home are basically playing the role of a single parent while the other parent is gone. If they are not prepared for single parenthood, they may have a difficult time, especially if the distal parent normally did all the activities with the kids and/or household work. Some distal parents mentioned how they made up a book full of information that the parent at home would not normally know, like when the bills were due, passwords on the computer, names and numbers of the distal parent's friends in case the parent at home needed help. This research illustrates the need to have some feeling of balance when a parent leaves the family. Setting guidelines and having a structure by laying everything out beforehand could help most families who are about to experience a distal situation.

The incarcerated parents did not utilize any type of transition planning, even though some of them knew beforehand that they were leaving. This may have been due to the fact that the parents were not an active part of the family before they were incarcerated or that they were not the type of people who carefully thought about consequences before acting or planned carefully for optimal future outcomes. In these cases, it seems that transition planning would not be effective because the parents that will be incarcerated do not have the desire to communicate with their families while they are participating in illegal activities. In addition, the parent at home already had begun the process of single parenthood while the other parent was participating in illegal activities.

However, transition planning will be effective for those families that do have willing and caring parents who got in trouble yet were intact with their families prior to incarceration. In addition, transition planning will also help those parents that are single and need to find a place for their kids. The Frank family provided a good example of what happens when there is no transition planning. The mother had a warrant out for her arrest so she had some time to prepare for her leave but neglected to do so. Since she did not prepare, two of her three children ended up going from house to house and had a difficult time as a result.

Even though transition planning may reduce the chance of additional change for children, it does not guarantee that unnecessary changes will occur. Cody Strathman's experience is a prime example of unnecessary changes that occurred and was out of his mother's control. Although Cody's mother planned for possible changes, it was out of her control when Cody was staying with his grandparents and because of them, Cody had to attend multiple schools in a year and a half. Ten year old Cody cried during most of the interview because he had a difficult time recalling negative memories of all his changes. So although planning can help, there is no guarantee because things may change once the parent has departed.

Transition planning is a way that the effects of change can be minimized for children. Another way to minimize the effects of change for children is to use creative communication. Parents need to use creative communication because their children are often too young to know dates so they need to think of ways to let their children know when they will be home. In addition, creative communication was used in this study

because their children were too young to communicate on the phone so parents had to think of ways to reach their children.

This research supports the idea that children take the news of a parental absence differently based upon their age. The parents with kids generally under the age of eight stated that their kids did not understand the concept of time. For example, when parents stated that they were going to be “gone for a long time,” the kids would think that their parents would be back in an hour. Laying out expectations will help children. Saying they will be home “soon” is too ambiguous for children and especially younger children who have no concept of time. Parents need to make the time period concrete for children to show them when the parent will be home. Having a type of a calendar helps children visualize when their parent will be home. A calendar in its truest form would probably not be very useful for a younger child because they would not understand it, so a parent would have to count down the days differently. For example, the Gentry family glued on a piece of jewelry each day their father was gone and the Keeley family had a long red/white/blue chain and they ripped off one link each day their father was gone. Even though it helps to be explicit to children about the time a parent will be home, parents should also be wary about making promises because there are unforeseen issues that may arise out of the parent’s control, such as extended leaves in the military which happened to five out of the twelve military families.

Parents may feel the dialectical tension of openness vs. closedness (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996) when trying to figure out how much they should tell their children about the time period that the parent will be gone. However, in the current study, Sheila Grant, the wife of a career military soldier stated that there is a fine line when

communicating with your kids because you do not want to make false promises. When a parent tells a child they will be home at a certain time, they should be there. The problem with the military that eleven out of twelve families mentioned in this study is that the parents only have a general idea and do not have a definite time when they will be coming home. This is an uncertainty for families because it is difficult to plan for the future when they do not know exactly when the other parent will be coming back. Therefore, in order to manage the uncertainty rather than reduce uncertainty (i.e., reducing uncertainty would be providing explicit information) parents should not promise a child when they will be home, but they should state that they will be home around a general time and tell the kid that there may be changes. Additionally, if there are changes, the kids will need to know that it is not because the parent does not want to see them.

Not only did this research find that children under a certain age had no concept of time and that there are dialectical tensions with parents because they should be explicit with their children yet be wary about making promises, this study also revealed that there is a certain age when children begin to realize the impact of what it means to have a parent gone for a long time. The older children interviewed stated that they really felt the impact of their parent being gone when their parent could not attend events that were important to them, such as sporting events, award ceremonies, or graduations. An application regarding creative communication is that parents in this situation should actively ask about those events and ask their kids to write all the details down for them or send pictures to them. In addition, parents should try to actively think ahead and figure out what activities they will be missing and tell their children that they are sorry that they

will miss it, and once again, reassure their children that it is not because they do not love them.

There were some unique ideas for creative communication provided by the participants that are relevant to this discussion. For example, when the children are too young to talk to on the phone, parents should come up with ways to speak to them in other ways. Kelly Johnson could not keep her son on the phone, so she read to her son every night by asking him to get a book. He was too young to read, so she made up a story and he thought she was reading the book to him. If the children are old enough to read, parents could leave messages in their drawers or hide messages for their children to find once the parent has left. Tanya Kirk hid messages for her children and she claimed that it made them feel good.

Along with creative communication, parents should also have consistent communication. Routine phone calls helped children look forward to a certain time they would talk to their parent and this helped reduce uncertainties for the children. This research found that the phone calls that were not routine sometimes caused stress for both the family members and the parent who was absent. For those who did not have routine calls, family members felt like they were waiting around for a call. However, for those who did have routine calls, the families looked forward to those times and treasured them. One participant, Debbie Darcy stated the most important thing for her and her son was to have a ritual with the phone call at the same time every week really helped. Her son stated that it also helped him because the ritual phone call was one thing that he looked forward to every week.

When communication is not consistent, children do not know what to expect and there will be more uncertainties as a result. Therefore, even if a parent cannot call during a certain week or two because they are on a mission or there is no money to call, as long as they have established a ritual already or have explicitly stated to their children they will establish a routine phone call, letter writing, e-mail, etc, children's uncertainties are likely to decrease as a result. Along with consistent communication for children, there should also be consistent communication for parents who are away. Some distal parents discussed how communication helped them get through their time away from their families. Communication in general could give a person meaning, but consistent communication would be something that could give a distal parent even more reason to survive the time away which will be discussed in the last portion of the next section on emotional climate.

Contributions to society. Research done in the communication field and in any field should be made relevant to society in general. The outline of this next part centers on the idea that distal parents and their families could utilize support outside the military and prison system. I posit that there should be a social service agency created specifically for distal families.

Chapter four discussed maintenance and how families of incarcerated parents and even a couple of military families found it difficult to communicate because of their socioeconomic status. In fact, there was something to be said about the actual *quality* of communication in relation to the socioeconomic status. Those in the military with a higher socioeconomic standing were able to communicate more efficiently because they had the money to purchase their own laptops if they wanted to use e-mail on a regular

basis. Webcam was a luxury that only two families talked about using but said it was a great way to communicate because they could see each other. Visits were only possible if military families had the money to pay for the plane tickets because the military did not cover any cost for visits home. Additionally, incarcerated parents and their families had an average annual income of near or below the poverty level. Because of this, families did not have the money to accept calls from prison nor did they have the money or financial means to visit the parent in prison. Families often had to borrow cars to visit and even if they did have access to a car, they did not have the money to pay for gas. In regard to socioeconomic status there were many issues relating to the quality of communication between military and incarcerated parents and their families if they did not have the funds.

There should be an organized social service program that would help families with a lower economic status communicate with their families. There should be some public assistance that could be structured through something like the Family and Social Service Administration (FSSA) that could help distal families communicate effectively by helping them economically and by helping them maintain their relationships and learning how to balance the emotional climate. The public assistance could be in the form of a distal family therapist who is readily available to help families through their pre-separation, separation, and reunion periods. The therapist could be tied to the program that would help families economically as well as emotionally.

The program could be readily available to distal families before a parent leaves to help families prepare and make transition plans. For those who have a low socioeconomic status, this program could provide a list of social service agencies that help them with

welfare, food stamps, health care, etc. In addition, this program could take families to prisons on a weekly basis so they could have routine visits. This program could also help military families by providing computers for them to use and teaching them how to use them. In addition, they could establish a videoconferencing center so they can communicate with their parents and visually see them.

Military personnel go through a demobilization process when they reenter the United States to help them readjust, but they do it without their families. In addition, incarcerated individuals can go through parenting classes while in prison, but again, they go through that without their families. The social service program could help all distal families go through a demobilization process together once the parent enters the home and could even prepare the families before the parent returns home. There were many issues that arose among these participants regarding the difficulty of additional responsibilities and learning how to adapt to their roles. Additionally, many incarcerated parents had to try and regain the trust of their family members and the difficulties were only heightened when they had to endure their children's testing behaviors. The social service agency and a distal relationship therapist could work with a family as a unit to help them deal with the issues of communication during pre-separation, separation, and reunion.

Strengths and Limitations

There are strengths and limitations to this study. The participants used for this study and the qualitative nature of the study were particularly noteworthy strengths that will be discussed. In addition, the limitations will also be explained. Particularly, logistical limitations, interviewing after the actual experience, and not interviewing those

of the same cultural, social, and political background were seen as the main limitations to this research.

Strengths. The strengths to this study include but are not limited to the contributions it makes to communication and family research. Communication is the key that holds distal parent/child relationships. Uncertainty is found in any parent/child distal relationship because parents and children cannot see each other face to face. When a family system uses effective relational maintenance and maintains a correct balance of the emotional climate, uncertainty can be reduced and/or managed.

In particular, participants were seen as a major strength in this study. This research advances communication and family literature in a way that involves a different type of relationship that has rarely been examined. Past long distance research has primarily examined couple relationships and looking at the parent/child relationship was unique. Additionally, the number of participants interviewed was another unique quality of this research. The number of participants interviewed can be seen as important in a qualitative study because a researcher will more likely reach theoretical saturation with an increase in the number of participants. In addition, interviewing more than one person per family allowed for verification of facts and interpretation when independent accounts of the same event were given. Finally, this research did not use college students as participants. Many communication researchers use students as their participants because they are easy to acquire on a college campus where most researchers are established. However, when college students are primarily used, the voices of others with different life experiences are not heard.

Most studies of relational maintenance are quantitative so this study added richness because it was a qualitative study. Although quantitative research is important, qualitative is equally important because it can provide depth to what has already been established and can provide a richer understanding of participants' experiences. For example, many studies of distance are either quantitative or clinical involving two people with relational problems. This study provided rich and thorough examples by participants to illustrate that distance can be used to maintain healthy relationships.

Limitations. One limitation to this research was that it was difficult to find families where both parents and the child wanted to be interviewed. Ultimately, it would have been most beneficial to interview both parents and the child for each family. But five mothers in this study were not currently with the other parent so only the parent, their child, and/or the caregiver could be interviewed. In addition, there were two parents who were interviewed that initially stated that their families would be present at the interview, but on the day of the interview their families were not present. The difficulty of finding three individual family members was also seen as a strength to this study because in general by interviewing two or more individuals independently, a form of triangulation was used. With this, it was clear to see where they agreed or disagreed and thus, establish more evidence of accuracy of recall which is uncommon in many communication studies.

There were some logistical limitations. One was the expectation that the participants would provide their documents to be examined. The personal documents of individuals (e.g., letters, diaries, journals, notes, scrapbooks, and e-mails) can provide insights into the construction of personal beliefs, identities, relationships, and

communicative styles (Creswell, 1998). Only three military families shared any type of document. However, their reluctance to share and their talk about the documents that they withheld demonstrated that postal mail was sacred to these individuals.

In addition to the difficulties of trying to retrieve their documents, there were several other logistical problems. The first was trying to get the incarcerated parents and their families to the United Way building because they did not have the proper incentive. Although there was a week full of interviews scheduled and reminder phone calls were made, many did not show up for their interview. This may have been because there was not an incentive offered besides the incentive that they would help other families in this situation. Interestingly, the ones that did show up for their interview explicitly stated that they came because it will help other families so providing that incentive over the phone worked for those families. It is recommended that anyone doing a study of this nature in the future should provide an additional incentive such as monetary funds for participants. To overcome this limitation, resources had to be utilized, and a plain-clothed security officer accompanied me to two houses and my husband to one house. The last logistical limitation was that two families by phone had to be interviewed by phone. Although it is more difficult to create rapport over the telephone, these families were willing to be interviewed and provided lengthy answers once rapport was established by the middle of the interview.

Another potential limitation of this study was interviewing after the distal experience. Memory is often a poor judge when it comes to remembering everything correctly. However, as the literature review and the interviews indicated, the distal experience is monumental for individuals. Because of this they are liable to remember

many details, feelings, and experiences. A time limit was used because after too much time, in this case, over two years, memories will fade. It is important to recognize though that even though the recall is not the ideal, it still captures many of the parents' and children's emotions and uncertainties felt during the distal separation. In addition, there was also corroboration among the family members when talking about certain events which provided evidence of accurate memory.

Those who did not have the same cultural, social, and political background as me were interviewed. Initially, they may not have felt comfortable speaking because of my background (e.g., a participant of another race than myself, a male participant talking to me, and/or a parent disclosing information to a non-parent such as myself, etc.). This is something all qualitative researchers encounter because there would be no point in interviewing if we were all alike. The main advantage to studying individuals and cultures that the researcher has no personal experience with is the following: When unfamiliar cultures are studied, it is less difficult to take things for granted (Spradley, 1979). Because of this, things were seen and heard that would not have been normally if I had been embedded in the culture as a parent who was incarcerated, in the military, and/or in school/work.

Personal experience with incarceration, military, and parenting, is limited and individuals may have also viewed that as a limitation. It is true that the participants may not have felt as connected to me as an interviewer because I do not share their experience. However, there were ways to establish rapport that was utilized so my respondents would answer honestly even if there were no shared experiences. Rapport refers to a harmonious relationship between an interviewer and interviewee (Spradley,

1979). For example, in terms of race, although Dunbar, Rodriguez, and Parker (2001) claimed that it helps to share race to build rapport, but if not possible, researchers can build rapport by crossing other cultural barriers such as political or social barriers. In terms of parenting, I explained that while I am not a parent, I have experienced being a child in a distal relationship with my mother.

Overall, the strengths outweighed the limitations because what was found in this study does not only further scholarship in communication and family literature, and provides a starting point for other research, it also has practical applications. Scholarship should be one that society as a whole could utilize and distal parents and their families could use the information in this study to their advantage. The next section will discuss how future researchers can use some concepts found in this study as a starting point and how they can advance this research in general.

Directions for Future Research

The following section is divided into six main topics that could be examined in future research. This research was the beginning of what could be many more studies stemming from this topic. Topics such as infidelity, shame and guilt, gender and guilt/shame, distal mothers and stay at home fathers, children's well-being, and military rumors and grapevine communication were all found within participants' answers and could be used for future researchers.

Infidelity. Future research should examine couple relationships when one partner leaves as a result of incarceration and the military. When interviewing parents specifically for the parent/child relationship, there was evidence of uncertainty regarding fidelity. Every parent, except for one family, when asked about uncertainty mentioned

that they at some point thought about whether or not their partner would leave them. The military individuals were also quick to mention many examples of others in their unit who had to deal with their cheating spouses back home, or that they themselves were having affairs while deployed.

The concept of infidelity should be explored in future research regarding the couple relationship in a distal experience. It was not a focus in this research since the research was about parent/child relationships. However, it is likely that children could feel the results of the infidelity as was the case with Blair Crawley. Blair Crawley was an adult son whose mother was in prison and who disclosed that he provided names and numbers of women for his father to call and have sex with. In this study, this was the only partner relationship that I knew for sure to have any evidence of infidelity. However, many individuals mentioned how the distance ruined so many marriages for other people that they knew. Research should examine what communication behaviors can help to overcome or prevent these failed marriages. In many instances, the issues may be there pre-separation and without communicating about those issues, infidelity could occur.

Shame and guilt. Future research should also examine the concepts of shame and guilt in relation to distal parenting. There is a social standard for parents to be the primary caregivers of their children (Eyer, 1996) and when parents are distant from their children they are not abiding by the standards set for them by society. Research on parental guilt and/or shame resulting from distal relationships is virtually non-existent. It is evident that mothers and fathers often use self-blame but the reasons and how they communicate their shame and guilt needs to be examined further. In a pilot study, Hudson (2004) interviewed eight distal parents. Without differentiating between shame and guilt,

Hudson found that guilt manifested in all the mothers interviewed who were in long distance relationships with their children and in one long-distance father who felt guilty because his son was doing poorly in school and he blamed himself for being away. Hudson did not examine the different types of distal situations (i.e., incarceration, military, and/or work/school) the parents were in and how that affected the attributions they felt and whether or not they used self-blame.

Researchers should also examine all the types of parent/child distal relationships in relation to how guilt and shame are communicated. The current research did not specifically ask about guilt/shame and that is the reason why it was not discussed. However, even though it was not asked, there were two mothers who specifically talked about the guilt/shame they felt. One was an incarcerated mother and one was a military mother. The following excerpt by Debbie Darcy discussed the impact that being distal military mother had on her:

Interviewer: Okay. Were there any uncertainties that you felt as a parent being away?

Debbie: Oh yeah, yeah [laugh] oh yeah [laugh].

Interviewer: Okay. What were some of the uncertainties?

Debbie: Well, just being a mom is a guilt trip in itself, being a mom on the other side of the world it just takes it to a whole new level. Um, yeah and you wonder how he's getting along with his dad. When I talked to him on the phone, he just sounded so sad every week. Of course he would say he was fine but you could just hear it in his voice. So that just made it tough.

Debbie stated that she felt guilty being away from her son. However, the following excerpt by Donna Furler who had been in prison many years out of her son's life stated how she did not communicate with her son because she felt so guilty. In discussing the difference between guilt and shame, Tangney and Dearing (2002) claimed that guilt involves a more articulated condemnation of a specific behavior (i.e., "what I did") while shame centers on more global evaluations of the self (i.e., "who I am"). Knowing that guilt and shame are often intermixed, it could be assumed that shame, in place of or in addition to guilt, could also be the emotion the parents felt.

Donna felt an element of guilt and/or shame and this coincides with past research on incarcerated parents. For example, Luke (2002) found that inmate mothers experienced extreme guilt while they were incarcerated and King (2003) stated that fathers felt guilty about the hardships their families faced as a result of their imprisonment. In addition, Mazza (2002) claimed that incarceration often leads to depression expressed through isolation and social withdrawal. Mazza claimed that there is a sense of shame and guilt experienced by the incarcerated parent which can lead to further withdrawal from contact with children which was the case with Donna. On the bright side, even though Donna withdrew from her son while she was away, both she and her son mentioned that they felt closer to each other once she got out of prison.

Gender and guilt/shame. Research should also examine the gender difference with the concepts of guilt and shame and with distal parenting in general. I speculate and future research can confirm that incarcerated parents, both male and female may feel two levels of guilt/shame. Because on one level, they feel guilt/shame about their behaviors that put them in prison and then they may also feel guilt/shame for actually being away

from their children. But incarcerated mothers may feel three levels of guilt/shame: One level for the incarceration, one level for the absence, and one level of guilt/shame for being a mother absent from her children. Military mothers on the other hand may feel two levels: One level of guilt/shame for being away from their children and another level for being a mother away from their children.

It seems that distal working and school related separations would create a different dynamic because there may be more guilt/shame associated with the actual leave-taking process. Military mothers could possibly justify that they have to go and that they have a bound contract that tells them they have no choice but to deploy.

Additionally, although incarcerated mothers may feel more levels of guilt/shame, their guilt/shame may rest more in the fact that they were doing illegal activities to put them in prison. However, for those parents who are working and in school, their guilt may actually be associated with the actual absence because they have more of a choice to leave their families in those situations. Future research should examine the double bind that women in all types of distal situations feel when they have to leave their children. It is important to examine since more and more women are entering the work force and going to school.

Distal mothers and stay at home fathers. Additionally, research should further examine what happens to the family dynamics once a mother leaves the family and the father is left with the children. Angrist and Johnson (2000) found that divorce rates increased only for female soldiers who were deployed. This suggests that managing the additional child care and household responsibilities may have been easier for the male soldiers' wives than for female soldiers' husbands. The husbands of military wives were

not used to handling the household alone and this finding may be due to the standards society places on what a family is supposed to be. In addition, the high divorce rates could also suggest other factors that could be examined in future research. For example, maybe the men are more likely to have affairs while the wife is gone or the wife is more likely to have affairs while she is away. In addition, the husband of a military wife may feel threatened that his wife is overseas in a predominantly male organization. There are many options to consider and research should further examine what happens when the wife separates from the family for an extended period of time.

Out of the nine families with distal mothers, only three had husbands who stayed home to take care of the kids and only one husband out of the three was interviewed. All the other distal mothers were single mothers who left their children to other caregivers such as their own parents. Because only one husband was interviewed and there were only three distal mothers out of the entire participants interviewed who had significant others, this research could not focus on the detail of gender differences regarding a mother leaving versus a father. However, the one husband who was interviewed, William Nixon said the following about his wife being gone

William: I feel sorry for 'em [laugh]. I mean, 'cuz it's only, it's not, it's not right.

Interviewer: Mm hmm.

William: The women should not be leaving their families. And I, it never, all this stuff never played role until it happened. You know, she'd be gone away for a weekend for an Army thing and everything was fine. But when she left, it was like, this isn't right, I should be the one gone, not her. I shouldn't be watching the kids, she should be home watching the kids, you know, she's more nurturing than

what a man is. You know, they're [men] supposed to be disciplinary and stuff like that. And the roles were totally flip flopped and so it was hard being, and I'm not, I don't know, it's I'm not real affectionate, like towards the kids. I was like, I will, but, I mean I told them I love them and stuff like but you know, to give them hugs and stuff like that, I'm just not that way. I'm very much that way with my wife, you know, even my son, I don't, I would go hit him before I hug him. Yeah that, okay, I'm sorry.

William Nixon claimed that he should have been the one fighting and Sally as the wife should have been watching the kids because she is "more nurturing" illustrates an attitude that still prevails in our society. Societal standards often result in stigmas placed on individuals who go against what society believes is best for each family. Although society is more accepting of working females than they were in the past, they may not be so accepting of a mother leaving her children for a period of time, as it was shown with William's statement.

Children's well-being. Future researchers should also examine the well-being of children with distal parents in all situations (i.e. military, incarcerated and/or school/work). This research found that children of incarcerated parents exhibited behavior and/or emotional problems at home or school predominantly more than military children. Out of the four military families that had children with behavior problems, one was depressed because his father was in a hostile situation. However, the other three families had mothers who were distal which may be attributed to the gender issue discussed earlier. The children of the Nixon family and the Johnson family went through many changes while their mothers were away which was stated to be the reason why

problems occurred with their children. However, the child of the other military mother's son experienced depression while she was gone and she could not explain why.

In addition to the change the children experienced, another reason for their emotional/behavior problems was because of the gender issue regarding a mother's leave versus a father's leave. Future researchers should examine the effects that a mother's leave has on children versus a father's leave. For example, the gender difference may affect the positivity used that was found to be a necessary component in these distal relationships. If a father does not agree with his wife leaving for a period of time, he may not talk as positively about their mother and as a result, children may be negatively affected. For example, in Sally Nixon's interview, she stated that her husband William threw the phone in front of the children when he found out Sally's assignment was extended another four months. Through his actions, he showed their children that he did not support what she was doing which then could have affected the children. Future research should examine how maintenance and emotional closeness and distance are affected when mothers with husband at home leave their children.

Future researchers should also examine how and why children of incarcerated parents have emotional and behavioral problems while their parent is incarcerated. In terms of the children's well-being for the children of incarcerated parents, another idea is presented. A high number of children had increased emotional and/or behavioral problems while their parent was incarcerated. The obvious reason for this would be feelings of neglect because they may take it personally that their parent has left them or they may blame themselves for their parents' troubles. However, since eight out of the eleven incarcerated parents were running the streets beforehand, the children should have

already felt a loss and hypothetically should have already been “acting out.” Since they did not act out until the parent was in prison, there may be another element that has not been examined and it may have to do with the connectedness that the children finally feel with their parents once their parents are in prison. Since it is not until a parent goes to prison that they tried to reconnect, these children may have acted out because it was not until then that the children knew what they were missing. They acted out in different ways, such as not studying and getting low grades, fighting in school, or getting mad at their friends for talking about their mothers when their own parents were imprisoned.

The idea of connectedness also pertains to time period once the parents are released from prison because they are often put on a program such as home detention and they cannot go anywhere but their homes and their work. Adam Babor talked about how his son acted up when Adam was back and it was not until Adam was off home detention and he visited his son’s school that his son stopped causing problems. Adam made the important connection that once he started visiting his son at school and becoming active in his school activities; his son then stopped causing problems. Future research should examine how and why children of incarcerated parents have emotional and behavioral problems while their parent is incarcerated.

Military rumors. The last concept that should be developed and examined in future communication studies was the idea that rumors were said to cause problems with the families that were interviewed. The participants mentioned that the military provides family readiness groups. These groups were helpful for some because they are like family support groups, providing information and support to families when needed. But for others, family readiness groups sometimes caused stress because rumors would run

rampant and it got to the point that Joanna Keeley stated the following about the readiness groups:

Joanna: So, and it was hard. I mean, you know one minute, you know I hate the rumors. I just hated going to those family readiness groups...I know they're supposed to be really helpful and everything but then you hear the rumors and then, "oh they're coming home," "they're not coming home," "okay they're going to come home" but then "they're going to turn around and ship them to Iraq."

Joanna stopped attending the family readiness groups because of the rumors within the group about when and where her husband's unit was going and when they would be home, etc. Family readiness groups are designed to aid military families while their military spouses are deployed by providing information and advice on how to manage while the partner is gone.

Sheila Grant whose husband is a career military member talked about the groups and stated that there is a hierarchy within the groups. She was a person of leadership within the group because her husband was in a position of leadership in Iraq and it was implicitly expected that she was to be there for the families that had not been through deployments before. Sheila stated that she tried to stop the rumors by telling others to talk directly to the people in charge and not to each other. But she claimed that even though she told them to do that, they still talked to each other to try to reduce their uncertainties.

Rumors were also discussed to be the cause of many marital breakups according to participant like Bob Grant who said he saw marriages breaking up all the time because people in his unit would hear that their wives or husbands were cheating on them or spouses at home would hear that spouses in his unit were cheating.

When describing some situations because they said people in their unit would hear a rumor about their cheating wife and then find out it is true. If what my participants said was true, whether rumors were true or false, they were the cause of much stress within the military and were potentially the cause of many marriage breakups in the military. For example, Sheila found out from another wife in the family readiness group that Sheila's husband was almost severely injured in a grenade attack which caused her to be stressed.

Future communication studies should examine military family support groups and even military units who deploy because from these interviews it appeared that rumors are embedded in the culture, making it difficult for military members and their families.

Conclusion

This dissertation outlined the reasons why communication needs to occur prior to a parent leaving, while the parent is gone, and after a parent returns. Overall, the distal situation was found to have an impact on the family system because there were many uncertainties involved with a parent leaving for a period of time. In general, uncertainty reduction and management were the prevailing concepts underneath the communication that was used. Specifically, in order to balance the equilibrium between change and stability, uncertainty needed to be reduced and/or managed. For example, some families who had not been through a deployment together did not know what to expect and did not know what to talk about before a parent departed. There were uncertainties while the parent was away because they could not actually see each other and they had to rely on what each other said. In addition, the quality of communication was a struggle while the parent was distal because their money situation may have prevented them to talk to their

families, or the postal mail was slow. Uncertainties also existed when the parents returned into the home and they had to re-negotiate their family dynamics in terms of new responsibilities, role changes, and communication about trust.

This study found and discussed important concepts regarding the experiences of military and incarcerated parents and their families. Additionally, after reading this, one should be able to know the effective types of maintenance used in a distal parent/child relationship and how to maintain the emotional climate. With the knowledge gained from reading this dissertation, families should be able to communicate more effectively, scholarship could be advanced by using this research as a starting point for other distal parent/child relationships and distal relationships in general, and society could be progressed by using the recommendations for creating agencies geared for distal family relationships.

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Footnotes

¹Because of the wording in this passage, updating the phrasing in brackets to reflect today's wording for gendered terms would make the passage difficult to read. So, it has been left in its original prose, but readers should be aware that Frankl intended this passage to be gender inclusive.

Appendix A

Individual Interview Schedule: Parent who was distant

I am interested in understanding your views regarding communication strategies you used in your long distance relationship with your child. I appreciate your time in responding to the following questions. Please answer each question frankly, as your responses will be held in the utmost confidentiality and there is no right or wrong answer.

1. How did you come to have a long distance relationship with your child/children?
 - 1a. How did you feel?
2. How did you tell your child that you were going away for a while?
 - 2a. Was that effective?
 - 2b. If you had to do it again, how would you do it differently?
3. What was your long distance relationship like with your child/children.
 - 3a. Tell me about your visits.
 - 3b. Tell me about you did or did not talk about during these visits with your child
 - 3c. Tell me about what you did or did not talk about during these visits with your partner.
4. What did you do to maintain your relationship with your child/children?
 - 4a. If you were to give advice to other parents about maintaining a long distant relationship with their child, what would it be?
 - 4b. What did you do to feel close with your child and/or family during the separation?
 - 4c. Describe specific instances that you let your child know you loved them while you were away.
 - 4d. Describe any instances that you distanced yourself from your child and/or family during your separation for the good of the relationship.
5. (if time) Would you have done anything differently than what your partner did if you were the parent at home?
6. Describe what was going on when this document was written (if applicable)
7. Now that you are home, describe any uncertainties you feel in your relationship with your child/children.
 - 7a. How do you deal with these uncertainties?
8. Every person in each family has certain roles that they have either placed upon them or they place upon themselves. Please describe how your roles changed when you left?
 - 8a. Please describe how the roles are different once you came back into household.
9. What was it like when you came home after time away?
 - 9a. Describe how your family and others treated you when you came back into the household.
 - 9b. What do you wish things were like at home?
10. How has your relationship with your child changed?
11. Overall, what was it like being away from your child/children?

Appendix B

Individual Interview Schedule: Significant Other

I am interested in understanding your views regarding communication strategies you used while your significant other was in a long distance relationship with your child. I appreciate your time in responding to the following questions. Please answer each question frankly, as your responses will be held in the utmost confidentiality and there is no right or wrong answer.

1. How did your significant other come to have a long distance relationship with your child/children?
2. How did you and your partner communicate to your child/children about the leave?
3. Describe your partner's long distance relationship with your child/children.
 - 3a. Tell me about any visits that occurred.
 - 3b. What did you and your partner talk about during these visits?
 - 3c. What did your partner and your child talk about?
 - 3d. What did you wish they would talk about?
4. What was your relationship with your child like during the period your partner was away?
 - 4a. Tell me about a time that illustrates your relationship?
5. How did life change when your partner left?
 - 5a. Please describe how you felt regarding the changes that occurred in your family?
 - 5b. Describe any discussions regarding any changes that might occur that you and family may have had
6. What did your partner do to maintain a relationship with your child/children?
 - 6a. Describe instances when your partner made attempts to be close to your children.
 - 6b. Describe instances when your partner made attempts to be distant for the good of their relationship with your children.
 - 6c. How would you have maintained the relationship if you were the one who was away?
 - 6d. What did you do to help your partner maintain a relationship with your child?
 - 6e. If you were to give advice to other parents in your situation, what would it be?
7. Describe what was going on when this document was written.
8. Describe any uncertainties your partner felt when away.
 - 8a. How did they deal with these uncertainties?
9. What was it like when your partner came home after their time away?
 - 9a. Describe how your family treated your partner when they came back.
 - 9b. What do you wish things were like at home now?
10. How has your partner's relationship with your child/children changed?
 - 10a. Please describe what conversations have you had about these changes.
11. Overall, what was it like being at home with your child/children while your significant other is away?

Appendix C

Child Interview Schedule

I am interested in understanding your views regarding communication strategies you used when your mom/dad was away. I appreciate your time in responding to the following questions. Please answer each question frankly, as your responses will be held in the utmost confidentiality and there is no right or wrong answer.

1. Tell me about your mom and dad.
2. Do you remember when your mom/dad was gone for a while?
3. How did you feel when your mom/dad left?
4. Describe how did you felt about your mom/dad being away?
 - 4a. Think back to the first few days after your mom/dad left, tell me how you felt during that time.
 - 4b. How do you feel now that he/she is home?
5. How did you let your mom/dad know what you were up to while they were away?
 - 5a. What kinds of things did you say?
 - 5b. Tell me about the conversation you remember the best.
6. Describe how your family has changed since your mom/dad left.
 - 6a. What types of things did you do to help your mom/dad while your mom/dad was away?
7. How do you let your mom and dad know you love them?
 - 7a. How did you let your mom/dad know you loved them while they were away?
 - 7b. How did your parent let you know he/she loved you while they were away?
8. Did you ever feel mad at your mom/dad while they were away? Tell me about that.
 - 8a. Tell me how you let your mom/dad know you were/are mad at them while they were away.
 - 8b. Tell me what types of things you did not want to talk about
9. Tell me what it was like when your mom/dad returned came home.
 - 9a. What do you talk about now?
 - 9b. What do you wish you could talk about that you don't now?
10. Now that you have been through this, tell me what you would tell other kids whose parents are going away for a while.

Appendix D
Demographic Questions

Approximate Distance of Separation (in miles) _____

Length of longest Separation _____

Number of Visits during the separation _____

Average length of visits during the separation _____

Frequency of Contact via:

Phone _____

E-mail _____

Letter _____

Fax _____

Other (please name) _____

Sex of long distance parent _____

Sex of parent at home _____

Sex of child interviewed _____

Age of Child interviewed _____

Age of long distance parent _____

Age of parent at home _____

Race of long distance parent _____

Race of parent at home _____

Family Income (please circle one)

1-20k

21-40k

41-60k

61-80k

81-100k

above

Appendix E
Consent Form for Parents

Project Title: Parent/child distal relationships: A look at communication used before, during, and after a parental absence.

Researcher: Laura Hudson is a Communication Ph.D. student at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

Purpose: I will be conducting a study using interviews to examine your perceptions and attitudes about the communication that occurs in your family. You may also choose to read and verify that what you said is accurately written in the manuscript. This is called a member check. If you are interested in serving as a member check, I will call you on the phone after I have completed a draft of the study. You must have been parent who was physically absent for a period of time (at least more than a month) or the significant other who stayed home during the physical absence. Distal is defined as having situational constraints that make it not possible to see each other on a regular and frequent basis.

Time: The total time for this study should take approximately 30 minutes to 2 hours depending on how much you choose to participate. Interviews will be audio taped. If you choose to be a member check, I will contact you by telephone after the study and this will last between 10-30 minutes.

Voluntary: Your participation is voluntary. You may quit at any time and you may refuse to answer any question.

Risk: There are minimal risks involved with the study. There is no more risk than you would experience in your daily interactions. If thinking about your family causes you discomfort and you feel the need to talk to a counselor after the interview, there are two counseling centers listed below that you can contact.

Benefits: The main potential benefit is the contribution to knowledge on this topic that could help improve the experiences of distal parent/child relationships.

Confidential: Your identity will not be revealed in transcripts, written documents, or verbal presentations of the data. The following steps will be taken to protect your identity and confidentiality.

1. Consent forms will be separated from the data.
2. Personal identifying information will be eliminated from the documents, transcripts and any reporting of the data.
3. You can refuse to answer any question asked
4. Audio tapes will be kept in a locked office for three years after I complete this study. Then they will be destroyed.

Contact: If you have any questions, feel free to contact the primary investigator, Laura Hudson, at 573-356-3133. You may also e-mail her at laurahudson@aol.com.

Questions: If you have any questions about your rights, contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB):
Office of Research, 483 McReynolds Hall, Columbia, MO 65211, (573) 882-9585

Counseling: Indiana Professional Psychological Services
6408 Constitution Dr.
Fort Wayne, IN 46804
260-469-0090

Family Counseling Center
117 N. Garth Ave.
Columbia, MO 65203
573-442-2591

Thank you for your participation
Laura Hudson, Ph.D. Candidate
Signing this consent indicates that you understand and agree to the conditions mentioned above.

Signature

Date

Appendix E (continued)

By signing below you also agree to have your child interviewed for this study. Your child's participation is voluntary and he/she may quit at any time and may refuse to answer any question. The time for the interview with your child will also be ½ hour to 2 hours depending on how much they have to say and if they want to participate in a member check. Their identity will not be revealed in transcripts, written documents, or verbal presentations of the data and the same steps that will be taken to protect your identity and confidentiality will also be done for your child.

Signature

Date

Appendix F

Minor Assent Form

Your parent is aware that I am going to ask you to participate in this interview. I want to know about the experience of when your parent had to leave the family for a period of time. This interview should take about ½ hour to 1 and ½ hours depending on how much you have to say. Also, if you would like to read what I wrote about what you said, I will call you and the phone call will take about 10 minutes to ½ hour. Your name will not be written anywhere and no one will know these answers came from you personally. If you do not want to participate, you can stop at any time. There will be no bad feelings if you do not want to do this. You can ask questions if you do not understand any part of the study.

Do you understand? Is this Ok?

Name (Please print): _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Investigator's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix G

Snowball Script

Hello. My name is Laura Hudson and I am doing a study on long-distance parent/child relationships to fulfill my Ph.D. requirement at the University of Missouri. I received your name and number through (name of their contact). I am calling you because I understand you or your significant other was away from your family for more than two months and is now back in the household. I also understand that there are also children in the family that are old enough to speak about their experience of having one parent physically absent for a period of time but who are under the age of 18. Am I correct in what I have heard about your family? If so, I am wondering if you would like to participate in this study.

Distal relationships are unique because many factors determine the successes or failures of long-distance relationships. This study will try to find communication strategies that help maintain the relationship as parents are separated from their children.

During the study, you will be asked to participate in an interview as will your significant other. I would also like to interview your child or your oldest child if you have more than one about their experience. Additionally, I ask that you bring any documents (bring 5 at the most) to the interview that you saved from your long distance experience. These documents could be in the form of e-mails, letters, postcards, etc., and they should specifically discuss the aspect of the separation.

There will be complete confidentiality with this study. There are no costs associated with this study and participation is completely voluntary. If you choose to participate, the study will last approximately 30 minutes and 2 hours depending on how much you have to say. We will set up a time and place that is convenient for you. You may also choose to read and verify that what you said is accurately written in the manuscript.

Thank you for your time.

VITA

Laura Hudson Pollom was born August 5, 1977 in Fort Wayne, Indiana. After attending Concordia Lutheran High School, she received the following degrees: B.A. in Communication from DePauw University at Greencastle, Indiana (1999); M.A. in Communication from Ball State University at Muncie, Indiana (2001); Ph.D. in Communication from the University of Missouri-Columbia (2005). She is married to Andrew Robert Pollom of Fort Wayne, Indiana, and she is presently a member of the Communication Department at Concordia University, River Forest, Illinois.