

Impact of Work Induced Separation on the Psychological Well-Being of Spouses of Military Personnel

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Abstract

With the inception of insurgency in 2009, a large number of soldiers have been deployed to the North East. While these deployments are necessary part of the military service, separation brings about changes within the family structure and add stress to the already existing stress of raising a family. Consequently these Military personnel and their spouses have suffered numerous psychological problems as well as disruption to contribution of the military personnel to their household and marital responsibilities. A semi-Structured interview was conducted with twenty (20) Military spouses in 2(two) Army barracks within Lagos and some commonly used slogans emerged: Husbands in diaspora, our visiting wives, check out my new look, have you seen the picture, keep in touch and so on. The participants accentuated various ways with which they maintain their relationship with their spouses. Some of the participants honestly agreed that the separation has both beneficial and harmful consequences on their relationships, but they handle it through frequent communication, trusting each other despite the separation, frequent visitation, sharing their marriage relationship goals, always getting into each other emotional space. The qualitative study carried out showed there are several factors that result from separation due to the military job. While all of the factors directly predict military spouse psychological well-being, some of them also moderate the relationships between the quality of spousal relationship, frequency of communication with the husband, and spouse well-being. These findings provide insight into the nature of military service, its relationship to the spouse psychological well-being and how it is affected by work induced separation. Precisely, the results show the areas where resources can be focused to enable military spouses overcome the increased stressors present during separations caused by military job induced separation.

Keywords: Military, Deployment, Work Induced Separation, communication, psychological well-being.

Introduction

Staying apart from a spouse can be a traumatic and draining life experience which could trigger different reactions. For many individuals, the changes in life experiences seem to be more demanding due to the absence of a spouse.

The military job is characterized with posting of personnel from place to place. It is a sacrifice to one's nation no matter the cost. This sacrifice could cost separation, economic consequence, and insecurity, reduced family status, affects the family mental health and may even cost lives at the end of the day due to the technicality of the Job.

Often times the military deploys its personnel from place to place at very short intervals which necessitates relocation of the personnel to a new environment that might not be possible for the posted personnel to move with the family for obvious reasons like lack of accommodation, lack of social amenities, international operations and so on. The civilian spouse decides to settle in a particular place where they begin to pay visits to each other when opportune to do so. Army families experience cycles of departure- absence- return throughout the course of their service which creates stress due to commotion accompanying departure, increased family expenses and

household responsibilities, loss of emotional support and the re-adjustments of roles upon reunion (Long 2018).

Few empirically examined changes have being found to exist in parenting behavior as a result of work induced separation. The divorce literature however implies that changes may be expected parents may become inconsistent, less affectionate and unable to control the home (Cavanagh, S. E. 2008).

Concept of Well-being

According to the World Health Organization (WHO 2011), mental health is “a state of well-being in which the individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to his or her community”. Mental health includes our emotional, psychological, and social well-being. It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices. Mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood (Lebel, 2011).

Mental health is a dynamic state of internal equilibrium which enables individuals to use their abilities in harmony with universal values of society. Basic cognitive and social skills; ability to recognize, express and modulate one's own emotions, as well as empathize with others; flexibility and ability to cope with adverse life events and function in social roles; and harmonious relationship between body and mind represent important components of mental health which contribute, to varying degrees, to the state of internal equilibrium.

From the perspectives of positive psychology or holism, mental health may include an individual's ability to enjoy life and to create a balance between life activities and efforts to achieve psychological resilience. Mental health, as defined by the Public Health Agency of Canada as an individual's capacity to feel, think, and act in ways to achieve a better quality of life while respecting the personal, social, and cultural boundaries. Mental health is an integral and essential component of health. The WHO constitution states: "Health is a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity." An important implication of this definition is that mental health is more than just the absence of mental disorders or disabilities. Mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community. Mental health is fundamental to our collective and individual ability as humans to think, emote, interact with each other, earn a living and enjoy life. On this basis, the promotion, protection and restoration of mental health can be regarded as a vital concern of individuals, communities and societies throughout the world. Mental health is associated with a number of lifestyle factors such as diet, exercise, stress, drug abuse, social connections and interactions.

In fact, regarding psychological well-being as a key aspect of mental health is difficult to reconcile with the many challenging life situations in which well-being may even be unhealthy: most people would consider as mentally unhealthy an individual experiencing a state of well-being while killing several persons during a war action, and would regard as healthy a person feeling desperate after being fired from his/her job in a situation in which occupational opportunities are scarce.

Perrig-Chiello, Spahni, Höpflinger and Carr (2016) identify three components of mental health: emotional well-being, psychological well-being and social well-being. Emotional well-being includes happiness, interest in life, and satisfaction; psychological well-being includes liking most parts of one's own personality, being good at managing the responsibilities of daily life, having good relationships with others, and being satisfied with one's own life; social well-being refers to positive functioning and involves having something to contribute to society (social contribution), feeling part of a community (social integration), believing that society is becoming a better place for all people (social actualization), and that the way society works makes sense to them (social coherence).

Military Deployment and Family Strains in Nigeria

Military postings, though unplanned, are routinely carried out with serious implications on the dependents of posted officers. However, strains of loneliness, home neglect by deployed officers, infidelity, unmet emotional needs, and truncated educational pursuit of children as well as indulgence in crime and deviant behavior by children of the deployed officers were reported problems associated with military deployment or posting.

Bello-Utu and DeSocio (2015) found that the ability of a child to cope with the absence of a deployed military parent is heavily dependent on age. Some families would have to cope with unmet family needs and depleted resources when the breadwinner is the deployed parent.

Lowe, Adams, Browne and Hinkle (2012) report that military deployment could impact parent child relationship. In Nigeria, insecurity has conscripted the military to be deployed for many internal operations such as Boko Haram terrorism, armed banditry, kidnapping among others. This is not strange development as the Military profession is associated with frequent relocations and deployment for special assignments which may be national or international. Military deployment leads to feelings of insecurity, emptiness, and increases levels of vulnerability of dependents. For the wife, she may dread the tendency of extramarital affairs by her husband in his new place of posting while the children are likely to suffer unmet needs arising from their father's absence; they may also fear that their 'breadwinner' may not return to them alive.

Besides, the Nigerian military faces unprecedented tasks of not only defending the territorial borders of Nigeria but also to keep internal peace and ensure safety of Nigerians from new forms of security threats such as kidnapping, armed banditry and farmers and herders' violent clashes (Tade et.al. 2019; Tade & Yikwabs, 2019; Tade & Yikwabs; 2020). Consequently, the psychological consequences of deployment apply to families. Partners of service members who are deployed, for example, face the challenge of worrying about and supporting a loved one for an extended period without knowing if or when they will return. Children face a variety of challenges at all stages of deployment. As they prepare for the absence of one of their parents, they adapt to the changes in the home that are inevitable parts of that absence, and then re-adjust to the return of their parent months or even a year or more. In fact, Service members themselves may face a range of challenges in reintegrating to civilian life following return from a combat deployment, including posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, substance abuse, or simply transitioning back to work and family life. Military deployment is a routine exercise, with intended and unintended consequences on the wellbeing of the families of the posted personnel's families. The family is the microcosm of the

society; therefore, anything that affects the family has implication for the larger society. Thus, the sudden nature of posting of an army officer may cause family disorganization. Posting in the army is one exercise most officers look forward to as it confers on them the requisite military experience as it heralds their promotion, associated with future leadership position for the posted officers.

Military Wives Psychological Wellbeing

The military wives are distinctly different and can be identified at a glance because their living conditions, the environmental pressures they face and their capability to survive against all odds with a smile on their face while being away from their husbands makes them distinct and role models for the citizens of this country (Patton, 2015). As an ordinary citizen one cannot fathom the difficulties the military wives face in their day-to-day chores.

Rosen (1996) measured psychiatric symptoms of Army wives and found that 70% displayed symptoms of anxiety/depression, either during their husband's deployment to the Persian Gulf during Operation Desert Storm and/or shortly after the soldier returned. In one study on stress reactions to military separation, findings indicated that 78% of wives experienced loneliness, 65% experienced sadness, and 56% experienced anxiety (Wexler & McGrath, 1991). Steel Fisher, et al. (2008) report more current data, which reinforce the aforementioned stressors related to separation during deployment, whereby measures of perceived impacts on psychological well-being, including feelings of loneliness, anxiety, and depression, were fairly widespread (78.2%, 51.6%, and 42.6%, respectively). Additionally, Easterling and Knox (2010) found that wives experienced significant increases in the following negative emotions: reports of loneliness went from 17.5% pre-deployment to 84.6% during deployment, levels of fear went from 57.5% to 73.8% and sadness went from 56.2% prior to deployment to 73.8% during deployment.

The military wives go about managing their families, their jobs, looking after their aged parents; knowing fully well that they cannot fall back on their husbands as they are deployed on borders and other difficult areas and need to be left stress free to do their task (Feldman, 2017). This is a situation which many military wives faces every two to three years with the constant threat of her husband not coming back to her. At times one wants to salute these brave military wives and wonders as to what stuff are these legends made of. It is not easy to live the life of a military wife; it needs sacrifices at various levels. They have to keep it together when their husband leaves for months on end or more to work at dangerous places. They have got to be fine with traveling with their families halfway around the world after every 2 years or sometimes even after a few months. With their spouse missing all the special things like birthdays, holidays, anniversaries, or gasping for child's birth, it is not an easy journey. Often, since going all over the world and keeping a career is not as simple as it seems, they have to put their career on the back burner. When they start a new life, they have to be comfortable with leaving close friends and family behind. Military deployment of the spouse in field areas can be hard for them, from managing the household to trying to fulfil all the needs of the children. At times, it is not easy to manage so much when you are constantly worried about the circumstances their husbands are serving in. (war or extreme weather conditions), but they simply do it with a smile on their face (Hasse & Johnston, 2012)

Research Questions

1. Does the quality of spousal relationship and frequency of communication with husband predict the psychological well-being of spouse of military personnel?
2. Does family support and frequency of communication with husband predict the psychological well-being of spouse of military personnel?

Research Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative research design was used for the finding of this study. Some demographic information's were gathered to enable the description of the sample. The tool for data collection was a one-on-one interview. An interview is an excellent means through which data are collected via questions to elicit information.

A Semi-Structured format of interview was conducted as the researcher ask the respondents some open ended questions to enable some intimacy and exploration of experiences of the participants while the closed ended questions were regarding age, sex, religion, number of children, years of separation.

Population of the study

The study was based on data collected through a one-on-one interview method with 20 (twenty) participants who are spouses of Military personnel from two (2) Military Barracks within Lagos; Ikeja Cantonment, 243 Recce BN Badagry Barracks. Ten participants were interviewed in each of the Barracks. Although the names used were coded and it focused on the non-military partner. Since it was centered on subjective experience, it was consistent in examining the non-military spouse.

Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants in order to get enough insight as possible as regards the way of life of the Military family. A typical case of purposive sampling technique was used due to the typical nature of the Military.

Data Analysis

The interview was recorded with an audio recorder and directly transcribed. It was a one-on-one interview session with the respondents. The transcription process was very helpful in validating and clarifying the coding strategies. As the transcriber the researcher had the opportunity to listen to the interviews over and over carefully reading through the transcriptions severally after which the researcher began to do a content analysis by highlighting quotes that reflected similarities in the answers given by the respondents.

Firstly, the researcher tries to find out the way they stay close to their spouse. Then code the phrases that describe some challenges the participants encounter when the military spouse is absent. Then code to describe the reason why the non-military spouses still stay married to these military spouses. After that the phrases for determining the core meaning of the participants answers and grouping similar categories was extracted. Some coding categories were identified: The feeling close technique, staying in touch, see you online, family motivation. With these areas highlighted, the researcher cut the noted codes and arranged them. She divided the quotes into slogans that were common to most of the respondents.

The topical areas that emerged were husbands in diaspora, keep in touch, Family support, See you online. The outcome of this study made sense with the qualitative method of analysis which met the goal of the research.

The result revealed the respondents way with which they stay connected to their military spouses when they could not physically be together, the challenges they encounter staying apart and the reasons they still stay married to these servicemen.

Let's keep in touch!

The exchange of information through speaking, writing or using some other medium or a means of sending and receiving information such as post-off and telecommunication. For spouses of servicemen, communication cannot be face-to-face due to the nature of the Military Job rather most of their communication and interaction would be through phone calls, social media, emails and other manual modes of communication like post office.

Almost all the respondents agreed that honest communication allows them to maintain an emotional connection with their partner. Communication makes it easier to navigate your long distance relationship as it helps them resolve issues, problems and conflicts that they encounter as a result of the job induced separation.

70% of the respondents agreed that communication is the bedrock for a healthy long distance relationship especially these days where technology has made it easier so much that they can see their spouses via video calls and other modes. This makes coping with separation more comforting knowing that out of sight could be out of mind. These category of respondent agreed that communication with their spouses keeps them focused and comforts them and other times makes the children easier to deal with, they knowing that they can see and talk to daddy.

Respondent B even said: I always seduce and promise my husband via video calls when he becomes cranky sometime, it goes a very long way.

Respondents E,F,H,I also agreed that talking to their military spouse daily about everything that happened in a day and rubbing minds about everything helps them feel so close to their spouse even though they are apart.

Due to the job peculiarities 30% of the respondents claimed that communication could be difficult as technology has its limitations especially for servicemen deployed for special operations to war zones and creeks where there is no network. Respondents C, G even recalled when their husbands were posted to the Northeast to fight insurgency and they could not reach them for 2years, how emotionally distressed they were, how their children were hard to deal with, asking for their fathers all the time and how difficult it was to cope emotionally due to the long absence of their military spouses.

See you online!

Technological limitation can make communication in a long-distance relationship difficult except if there is a prior notice by the military spouse so that the civilian partner would have an idea when it becomes impossible for them to communicate to reduce stress and emotional distress. This makes coping in a work induced separation easy especially if it is regular and consistent.

Two of the main factors that have the power to influence how often and when partners communicate are availability of internet connection and location of the personnel. For one of the participants she said: There are times of complete silence, it could even be up to a year depending on the type of operation being undertaken by the personnel. There was a time I could not reach my husband for close to one year because of lack of network in the Sambisa Forest (Participant C).

Participant A said: banking on intimacy online fails most times due to the areas their spouses are posted to.

It can be observed that sometimes online intimacy could fail being that one of partner is in a place where there is no network. In a case where one of the spouse chooses to cheat tends to get the most attention especially if there is a friction between the personnel and their spouse back home.

Husbands in Diaspora

Before now the greatest issue affecting Nigerians in Diaspora is marital breakdown. Migration is one of the major intricacies of the military profession as these servicemen are meant to rotate location regularly making it almost impossible for their spouse to fully enjoy their presence. Most of these women have gotten used to this lifestyle of staying apart as some even joked about it. The slogan "husbands in diaspora" Commonly used among the military wives is derived from the constant absence and displacement of their husbands due to the nature of the Military profession which makes it impossible for them to choose their posting or decline a posting. Deployment occurs within a wider context for military families as they averagely move every year or every other year depending on the personnel's corp.

Participant A: Since we got married 15years ago we have barely spent 3months together at a stretch due to army posting from one place to the other. I call my husband, "Daddy in diaspora"

Participant I: I see my husband as my guest and treat him as such. Sometimes I feel he has over stayed away from the family because I am now used to staying alone with the children.

97% of the civilian spouses of the servicemen looked deeper into the relationship between work-induced separation and technology, smart phones specifically the effect of smartphones on their relationships. The researcher concluded from the analysis that smartphones play an integral part in maintaining intimacy between these servicemen and their spouses as most of the participants agreed that it plays an important part as they are able to exchange pictures, see each other online and do a lot more.

60% even disclosed to having a nice time (phone intimacy via voice or video) with their spouses. They claim it has a way of reducing the built up tension from the months of separation due to the job peculiarities of the Military.

3% were of the view that maintaining their relationship through intimacy via internet can only be possible where there is network as most of their spouses could be posted to places where there are no network which could make communication impossible.

Communication happens in a fluid way generally without fixed hours and times for sending texts or calling and it is influenced heavily by events of everyday life with one of the participant who mentioned that they try to squeeze in communication whenever they can or have free time. But

there are also exceptions with one couple preferring to communicate according to a understood agreement between them.

Participants A and C: we talk every day and we normally have a schedule mostly because of 'Tattoo' a military head count that all personnel participate in before bedtime. Sometimes anxiety could result if am unable to connect as planned. It could be stressful other times.

Participant I: There could be an emergency operation that would not give our spouse the opportunity to inform us which leaves us anxious with sleepless nights while we worry over their safety and fear the unknown.

Family support

According to WHO throughout human history, the family has assumed a key role as the basic socio-biological institution. The support of the family unit contributes to personal health condition. The complex inter-relationship between health and family constitute an area where the gaps in knowledge are substantial and where the integration of research findings into a coherent family-based theory is only just beginning.

The concept of family health invokes the recognition that the wellbeing of an individual even in his physical, organic part is profoundly affected by the primary social group which is called the FAMILY.

For these participants their family is the neighbor in their immediate environment. They explained that family support to them comes from the various support groups in the Barracks where they live; they get help and support from their various groups when required. These groups range from religious groups to social groups, cooperative society where they save money together for rainy days. Also there is an Association of wives of Military personnel. This Association involves all the wives; they meet once in a month to discuss issues bothering on their efficiency as officers wives, they organize empowerment programs, they go on charity tour and community service, they also organize Prayers for their spouses and Families.

In the Barracks they have tribal meetings, Islamic groups, church groups (catholic and protestant).

Participant A: It was marriage that brought me to Lagos. I don't have any family or relative here, I knew I had to join a group for family support when my husband got posted. I joined a cooperative group where we save money monthly. I save monthly in case of a rainy day. Any time I am in need they are the next family I run to.

Participants E and J: We are family here in the Barracks; everyone is his brother's keeper. Even when you put to bed, maximum support is guaranteed as the women run most errands and do all the chores. They are more than families. This support means a lot as it keeps us going even in the face of challenges. We cry and rejoice together.

85% of the participants agreed that the acronym "Family support" to them means their neighbors and friends in their environment where they live. They derive so much joy leaving together, they get support from each other as a result of their peculiar situation. They form a bond of friendship, visit and share problems, and go out to kill boredom and maintain a good mental health knowing that they are like people that are going through the same circumstances as you, which is very encouraging.

Participant C: We stay strong together. We fear so many things for our spouses especially those in war zones. We encourage each other by living together in peace.

13% of participants still maintain that Support from blood relatives still meant a lot to them. They claim love and support from their Families gives them the courage to invest more in their relationship knowing they have Families solidly behind them.

2% of the participants believe that staying busy takes your mind off a lot of happenings around them and having something to do means family support to them and consistent encouragement from their husbands keeps them going.

Family support in anyway helps spouses in work induced separation cope with their mental health and also builds trust which further strengthens the relationship.

Discussion

After computing data from interviewing 20 participants from two (2) Military Barracks several patterns emerged as observed by the researcher and they are directly connected to questions and topics that were addressed during the interview sessions. These included: "Keep in touch", "See you online", "Husbands in diaspora", and Family support".

"Keep in touch" and "See you online" talked about the influence and role that digital media and mediated communication play on the developments and inner workings of romantic relationship which are noticeable when partners meet each other face to face with two screens apart. When considering the optimal frequency of different communication media, it may be beneficial for the couple to also discuss the potential upsides (e.g., ease of daily e-mail writing, calling) and downsides (e.g., conflicts during phone calls as a distraction in the field) for each medium. As any other relationship, work-induced separation in a relationship requires constant communication but in this case there is also important element which is technology with its communication mediums. The result of this study have proven that technology plays a very significant role in a long-distance relationship. WhatsApp assumes dominance when it comes to interaction and privacy.

Texting is also a beautiful way of communication which is a legitimate sign of affection and connection that nurtures intimacy between couples. A key factor in maintaining a positive spousal relationship and positive psychological well-being during a deployment caused separation is frequency of communication with the husband. The literature pertaining to the significance of communication within the marital relationship during separation identifies both the benefits and the difficulties. For instance, it has been noted that open and transparent communication throughout the deployment is critical to sustaining strong and healthy military marriages (Hinojosa, Hinojosa, & Hognas, 2012).

"Husbands in diaspora" was used to describe the frequent redeployment of their spouses and how it affects their absence in the home." Our husbands are everywhere, before you know your husband is in a new deployment, it is hilarious". "The main issues and frustration in having a husband in diaspora is not having them around on special occasions like childbirth, birthdays, marriage anniversaries and family function.

Another participant agreed that "parts of the conversation most times are lost, sometimes when I write something he might not get the emotion behind it because it is just a text"

Another contributor to wives' psychological well-being is informal support, which is considered to be intentionally created, voluntary connections that consist of naturally occurring groups, nuclear and extended family members, friends, and work colleagues (Hollingsworth, 2011)

Additionally some of the participants stressed the need for 'family support' as it strengthens their resolve that no matter the difficulty, they would overcome it. This is as a result of the encouragement they get from the system (neighbors, friends, association, colleagues, and church group). In fact, several studies found those women who were active in events arranged by the military, employed, enrolled in school, committed to activities of interest, or involved in their religion and church community, were able to cope with the separation better than those who do not have the support. In fact, several studies discovered those women who were active in events arranged by the military, employed, enrolled in school, dedicated to events of interest, or engaged in their religion and church community, were able to cope with the separation better than those who persistently stayed at home (Bowen, Mancini, Martin, Ware, & Nelson, 2003)

Conclusion

Using interview method, this study shed light into the nature of the military service, its impact on the psychological well being of the spouse and how the various slogans elicited helps these women maintain a good relationship with their military spouse. While there has been lavish research on service members and retirees, there is significantly less knowledge around the military wives on the home front. Spouses gave numerous suggestions as to how service providers can address their unique experiences and challenges to improve the supports they offer military families, including ensuring the spouse get psychological support from the military health care service and providing support programs that focus on the entire family.

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