



Impact of Perceived Social Support on Resilience among Military Families

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Abstract

Most military mental health research in Nigeria has been conducted among military personnel, with little attention given to their families. The transitions that come with military life has been linked to an increased risk of psychological distress in military families. This study was aimed at assessing the impact of perceived social support on resilience among military families. A cross-sectional survey design was adopted to obtain information from 248 family members of military personnel deployed amongst which 135(54.4%) were spouses and 113 (45.6%) were children. The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS) and Response to Stressful Experience (RSE) Scale was used as data collection instruments. Linear regression analysis was used to assess the impact of perceived social support on resilience. The result showed that perceived social support significantly predicted resilience among military families ($\beta = .205, P = .001 < \alpha = 0.05$). The findings were discussed in relation to related literature. It was recommended that the military authorities should factor in family support programs for military families to enhance their mental robustness and resilience. This is in order to effectively cope with the transition that comes with military life and to improve military families quality of life.

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Introduction

When a member of the family joins the military, the newly formed military family makes an often unspoken decision to embrace the obligations of military life. This change may necessitate a significant amount of personal adjustment, (Riviere and Merrill, 2011). Families are often the primary support system for service members, playing a vital role in the readiness and wellbeing of the military force and acting as the bridge between the military and civilian worlds, (Foundation Strategy Group [FSG], 2017). Military families are used to dealing with the many transitions that come with the military life of spouses and parents alike characterized by repeated deployments and frequent transfers that also involves frequent moves, and habitually upset in social support systems (Barker and Berry, 2009). This has led to changing schools, jobs and new friends in families. On the other hand, even if families aren't directly affected, they may know others who have lost a loved one or who has witnessed a parent or spouse return with major physical or mental conditions during the course of military duties. Although these changes may be fruitful by providing possibilities for growth and adventure, they can equally be disruptive (Lester and Flake, 2013).

Family members confront specific problems in terms of being effectively prepared for deployment, supported during deployment, assisted after deployment, and preparation for subsequent deployments, all of which can have a negative influence on their mental health and wellbeing, (Denning, et al., 2014). Military duty has been shown to increase the risk of psychosocial burden not only for military personnel but also for their spouses and children (Cunitz et al., 2019) such as separation-related psychological issues and the stress of adjusting to various deployment stages. These challenges associated have been observed in military families, resulting in low family cohesion and poor quality of family relationships, marital problems, partner distress, and a negative impact on psychological wellbeing (Verdeli et al., 2011). Skomorovsky (2018), considered family wellbeing from the perspectives of objective, subjective, and functional wellbeing. Objective wellbeing refers to resources considered necessary for adequate quality of life such as social connections, the subjective well-being is the result of how individuals think and feel about their circumstances while functional wellbeing focuses on the degree to which families and their members can and do successfully, (Le Menestrel and Kizer, 2019). In general, military deployment can cause psychological strain in military families, characterized by psychological distress (Villagran et al., 2013).

Military service has been linked to an increased risk of psychological distress in some spouses and children of military personnel (Rodriguez and Rodriguez, 2015), especially absence due to deployment. Multiple studies from the 1980s and 1990s reporting that spouses and children of military personnel frequently experienced symptoms of depression during and immediately after their loved one's deployment (Rodriguez and Rodriguez, 2015; Eaton et al, 2008; De Burgh et al., 2011; Verdeli et al., 2011). Ongoing military operations across the country has led to frequent deployment of troops. Deployments are consistently cited as the most stressful component of military life and has been linked to poor mental health in military families, behavioral difficulties in children, a higher likelihood of divorce, and higher rates of suicide (Agazio et al., 2014; Meadows et al., 2016). However, Donoho et al, (2018), outlined that deployment alone may not have a detrimental influence on military spouses; rather, the impact of the personnel's mental health on spouses may increase the likelihood of psychological distress. On the other hand, Cunitz et al. (2019) discovered that military children are depressed more than civilian children. Furthermore, children of deployed military members were shown to be at a higher risk of depression (Gorman et al., 2010, London, 2021; Trautmann et al., 2015). In relation to this, Liu et al, (2018) opined that internal stress adaption and external societal support play crucial factors in individuals' ability to overcome mental stress.

Understanding the social support resources required to improve mental health is critical. Proponents of wellbeing research have emphasized the buffering role of social support against distress. The literature on perceived social support and psychological distress has confirmed that perceived social support is a useful

tool for motivating and encouraging better mental health, as well as examining potential approaches to avoid psychological pain (Saddique et al., 2021). Rodríguez-Fernández, et al. (2021), identified that there is substantial debate in studies on the importance of social support in adjustment as to whether it is crucial to focus on the perceived support or assistance received. Although both sorts of assistance can help with psychological adjustment, it appears that perception has the greater impact (Rodríguez-Fernández, et al., 2021). As a result, it's worth looking at the nature and structure of social support to improve psychological well-being. Thus, subjective experience of social, psychological, and interpersonal help that sustains and improves health and wellbeing is referred to as perceived social support (Gottlieb, 2009; Tariq et al., 2020). Perceived social support is divided into three dimensions of family, friends and significant others (Zimet et al., 1988). Perceived support by the military, community, or religious organizations was associated with less parenting stress and fewer children in a high-risk category (Flake et al., 2009).

It is predicted that all the indexes of perceived social support will influence resilience (Dey and Amponsah, 2020). Perceived social support could be sourced from co-workers, family, neighbours, friends, or significant others alike. This serves a protective role in creating a higher quality of life from a psychological standpoint (Liu et al., 2018). It has been suggested during the last decade, that a stronger proclivity for social support is linked to reduced levels of depression, anxiety, and stress (Every-Palmer et al., 2020). Skomorovsky (2014) underlined the function of perceived social support in psychological wellbeing, as well as the importance of accounting for perceived social support when explaining differences in psychological wellbeing among military families and has been implicated in fostering and sustaining resilience (Hickling et al., 2011).

Resilience is a significant feature that predicts certain behaviours to cope with psychological discomfort (Saddique et al., 2021). According to Rutter (2013), an individual's ability to successfully endure and adapt to stress, difficulties, or environmental changes is described as resilience. Windle (2015), added that resilience is a human trait or an adaptive mechanism that can be formed in the face of adversity, trauma, tragedy, threats, severe causes of stress, or surmounting unpleasant events. Resilience explains how people behave when they are under a lot of stress and how they adapt to the situation (Saddique et al., 2021). According to studies, resilient people are more likely to have more social support than non-resilient people (Hickling et al., 2011). Resilience is critical in the lives of military families to cope effectively with the challenges of military life as it affects them. Meadows et al. (2016) defines family resilience as the ability of a family to respond positively to an adverse situation and emerge from the situation feeling strengthened, more resourceful, and more confident than its prior state. These adverse situations are not unconnected with the challenges of military live by family members.

Statement on the Problem

Throughout history, military families have shown great capacity for adaptation and resilience. For instance, military spouses play an important role in ensuring family cohesion and maintaining a balanced, salutary environment during service members' deployment (Spera, 2009). This is realized by providing a stable, healthy home environment to returning service members, easing their transition back into civilian life and bolster their resilience (Tanielian & Jaycox, 2008). In recent years, it is believed that families of military personnel in Nigeria have faced numerous obstacles as a result of unprecedented long and multiple combat deployments of personnel due to several ongoing military operations across the country. Most military mental health research in Nigeria has been conducted among military personnel. Little attention has been given to military families and their contribution in coordinating and bringing balance to the Homefront most especially while military personnel are away due to exigencies of service.

Despite the need to better understand the impact of deployment on military families and to provide appropriate support, there is a lack of comprehensive research (Park, 2011). Surprisingly, no research has

been done on the impact of perceived social support on resilience among military families in Nigerian. This research might be beneficial in putting military families' mental health into context. This understanding is critical since proper social support and internal processes like resilience can have an impact on psychological wellbeing, particularly among military families. The importance of this study cannot be overstated, as it will go a long way toward assisting military families' mental health. Given the aforementioned, the purpose of this study was to look at the impact of perceived social support on resilience among military families. This study aims to investigate how perceived social support will influence resilience among military families.

Method

Setting

The study was conducted at the Maimalari Military Cantonment, Maiduguri, Borno state. The cantonment houses notably, the Headquarters Joint Task Force (Northeast), Operation HADIN KAI and the 7 Division Nigerian army which is one of the three sectors under operation HADIN KAI. Equally, the cantonment has a rich barrack community housing military families.

Research Design and Participants

The study made use of a cross-sectional survey design involving two hundred and forty-eight (248) participants comprising of spouses and children of military personnel deployed which included 135(54.4%) spouses and 113 (45.6%) children with a total of 68(27.4%) males and 180 (72.6%) females. It was also revealed that a total of 85 (34.3%), were below 20 years while 163(65.7%) were above 21 years. Participants' religion showed 98(39.5%) were Muslims and 150(60.5%) were Christians. Marital status revealed 119(48.0%) were married, 3(1.3%) are currently divorced, 12(4.8) were widowed and a total of 114(46.0) were single. Occupation revealed a total of 108(43.5%) are students, 67(27.0%) are currently employed, and 73(29.4.3%) are unemployed.

Procedure

All 248 participants were purposively selected for the study with the assistance of the barrack *Magajiya* (woman-leader). The researchers got access to the participants during a periodic mental health barrack sensitization program for military families. Participants were adequately briefed on the nature and purpose of the research and were assured that their responses will be treated with utmost confidentiality. It was equally made clear to them that participation was voluntary. It took an average of 20 minutes to fill out each questionnaire after which the questionnaires were retrieved from the participants and subjected to data analyses.

Instruments

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS)

The MSPSS (Zimet et al., 1988) is a 12-item survey of perceived social support sources. It has three subscales for perceived support from family, friends, and significant others, as well as a summary score (12 to 84). Each item is graded on a 7-point Likert scale, with "strongly disagree" to "very strongly agree" being the extremes. In this study, the total scale score was calculated by taking the arithmetic mean the sum of the scores on all of the items. A high score suggests adequate social support. The MPSS is approved for usage in Nigeria. (Hamza et al., 2012).

Response to Stressful Experience Scale (RSE)

The RSE scale (Johnson et al., 2011) is a 22-item inventory initially validated in military and veteran populations as a measure of individual differences in cognitive, emotional, and behavioural reactions to stressful life events. The scale focuses on intrinsic personal traits and how an individual normally responds

during and soon after stressful experiences. Meaning-making and restoration, active coping, cognitive flexibility, spirituality, and self-efficacy were confirmed as five-factor substructures in the original survey; however, these are not intended to be freestanding subscales.

Data analysis: Statistical analyses were conducted using the IBM SPSS Statistics: version 23 with significance set at $p < 0.05$. Regression analysis was utilized to analyze the impact of perceived social support on resilience.

Results

Table 1: Summary table of Simple Regression Coefficients on Impact of Perceived Social Support on Resilience Among Military Families

		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
	(Constant)	64.017	2.070		30.919	.000
1	Perceived social support	.117	.036	.205	3.286	.001

The findings for the regression analysis in the table above shows that the parameters are statistically significant, and that perceived social support significantly predicted resilience among military families ($\beta = .205, P = .001 < \alpha = 0.05$).

Discussion

We investigate the impact of perceived social support on resilience among military families. The results indicated that perceived social support will significantly predict resilience among military families. In essence, how friends, family members, and significant others are perceived as sources of material, psychological, and general assistance during times of need will impact resilience. This is because family members often find receiving social support to reduce experiences of stress (Verhaeghe et al., 2005), as this improves quality of life for members and support child development. Malia (2006) identified social support as one of the pieces towards understanding family level of resilience.

Prior wellbeing studies discovered that perceived social support is a beneficial tool for motivating and encouraging better mental health (Saddique et al., 2021), Perceived social support have been linked to lower stress levels among military spouses, particularly during deployments (Van Winkle and Lipari, 2015) thereby building family resilience i.e., a family's ability to bounce back from adversity and emerge stronger, more resourceful, and more confident than before (Simon et al., 2005). Other scholars have identified the impact of perceived social support on resilience. For instance, Dey and Amponsah (2020) emphasized the importance of incorporating and emphasizing not only support from significant others but all other sources in resilience-enhancing interventions aimed at reducing stress and increasing wellbeing in their study on the impact of perceived social support on resilience among parents raising children with special needs in Ghana. Increased social support also enhances the resilience of caretakers of patients, (Salim et al., 2020; Ong et al., 2018). Social support has equally been shown to promote resilient outcomes among children who experienced childhood sexual abuse (Marriott et al. 2014).

Additionally, high social support, according to a growing body of evidence increases stress-regulatory practices. Available evidence further suggests that strong social support can boost self-esteem, reduce dangerous behaviours like binge drinking, and promote more effective coping techniques like active problem resolution (Sippel et al., 2015). This is because strong social support can boost feelings of

belonging and solidarity, stimulate good coping habits like exercise, assist an individual in redefining a challenging circumstance as less threatening, and improve emotion regulation by reducing mistrust, anxiety, and fear (Sippel et al., 2015). In essence, poor social support impedes individual resilience. To this end, it can be reasoned that resilience in the family is highly dependent on social systems that provide positive support.

Judging the role the military plays across the country characterized by deployments over long periods of time and other oversight functions, enhancing family resilience is essential for family wellbeing during periods of absence of military personnel. In turn, it is believed that the realization that the family is adequate by military personnel while in the line of duty will have positive effects on their disposition thereby boosting operational effectiveness and in turn serving as a force multiplier. Therefore, promotion of social support through supportive caregivers, family units, and military administration depending on the needs of military families will enhance family wellbeing and their quality of life.

Conclusion

Individuals have a great deal of adaptability when faced with adversity. However, because this adaptation necessitates the smooth operation of numerous interconnected systems within and around the individual, perceived social support has been linked to resilience. There is a strong association between perceived social support and resilience among military families. In line with the foregoing, the ongoing military operations across the country as well as within the West African subregion which has led to frequent deployment of military personnel away from their families underscores the importance of social support in the lives of spouses and children of military personnel they left behind. Using the results of this research, military authorities should factor in social support programs for military families to enhance their mental robustness and resilience in order to effectively cope with the transition that comes with military life and to improve military families' quality of life.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Ethical issues were completely observed by the authors.

Competing Interests

The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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