

EXPLORING ASSOCIATIONS BETWEEN PARENTAL MILITARY SERVICE AND INSECURE ATTACHMENT IN MILITARY CHILDREN

Rooma Sharma,
School of Social Sciences, IILM, Gurugram, Haryana

Abstract

Military families experience contextual stressors like deployments, frequent relocations, family separations and reunions that necessitate changes in the family functioning, individual roles and responsibilities and its subsequent impact on the dynamics of a parent-child relationship. This paper analyzes the impact of military stressors on children using the “Attachment framework” as a developmental approach.

Keywords

Parent-child attachment, military children, attachment security, military stressors, ambiguous loss, developmental period.

Introduction

Military lifestyle involve risks of injury or fatality to the life of a service member, periodic family separations due to various deployments, reintegration post separations, frequent geographic relocations and postings to out-of-country missions (Segal, 1986). Most of the research with military children is based on target samples in Western countries and brings out an inverse relationship between military-related stressors and adverse youth outcomes. There is a dearth of research which explores insecure attachments in military children and links military stressors to children's ability to use their parents as a secure base (Posada et al., 2011). During deployment phases, insecure attachment behaviours like fear, clinginess, crying or bed-wetting have been observed in younger military children whereas emotional dysregulation, anger, aggression, withdrawal, sense of abandonment or academic difficulties have been noted in older school-age children). This paper attempts to explore underlying mechanisms affecting attachment security in military families.

Exploring attachment disruptions in military families

“Attachment Theory” proposes that parent-child interactions provide the framework within which children acquire skills and interaction strategies, and develop representations about themselves and others (Bowlby, 1982; Ainsworth & Waters, 2015). The consistent availability of parents as caregivers provides a sense of security to the children enabling them to explore new environments and navigate interpersonal relationships (Bowlby, 1982; Ainsworth & Waters, 2015; Sroufe, 2000). The physical absence of the service member triggers separation anxiety and heightened proximity-seeking behaviour in family members seeking emotional

reassurances (Farnsworth & O'Neal, 2021) and repeated absence of serving military members can lead to the formation of insecure attachment amongst the family members. Military personnel suffering from PTSD or other psychological problems after deployment may display behaviour which may cause further secondary traumatization in children (Holmes et al., 2013; Paley et al., 2013). The PTSD symptoms may interfere with the parenting functioning as a consistent caregiver- a figure who cannot be trusted as a "safe haven" or "secure base" manifesting in insecure attachments in the military parent-child relationship.

The "Ambiguous Loss" concept was developed by Boss (2004) to explain how families handle the ambiguity of the temporary absence of a service member from the family system by formulating ways to keep the absent individual "emotionally or psychologically" present within functional roles and responsibilities. Military families face a complex situation of uncertainty, loss and fear of safety of the service member each time the he/she is deployed. A related aspect of "Ambiguous Loss" is the concept of "Boundary ambiguity," wherein families adjust and readjust to shifting roles and responsibilities when members temporarily enter and exit the family system (Chawla & Solinas-Saunders, 2011; Faber et al., 2008; Huebner et al., 2007; P. Misra & Singh, 2014; Mmari et al., 2010). It is the perception of "Ambiguous Loss" by each family member which manifests as insecure attachment behaviour in the family relationships (Chandra, Martin, et al., 2010; Faber et al., 2008; Hooper et al., 2014; Huebner et al., 2007; Kelly & Paul, 2018; Misra & Singh, 2014). A qualitative study of Indian military adolescents by Misra & Singh (2014), brings out the concept of boundary ambiguity of "being there and still not being there" in children's daily functioning while communicating with the deployed parent.

"My father tells me from there..... to study English, opt for Maths, take coaching classes. If he had been here then he would understand that I can't study Maths with English & Hindi. How can I manage coaching, tuition everything? He would understand had he been here. There is no one to help. I study but he just is not convinced. Keeps giving instructions on the phone all the time."

The above quoted experience reflects the sense of disconnect and deterioration in parent-child attachment quality during different deployment phases.

'Attachment Network Model' proposed by Riggs & Riggs (2011) explains military family functioning based on the attachment style of its individual members. Each time a service member exits during deployment or later enters back into the family system, the structure and organization of the family is drawn and redrawn with associated changes in family roles and power dynamics. As per this model, the attachment styles (secure or insecure) of family members act as the mechanism which causes the restructuring of family boundaries during family separations. Insecure attachment style of "at home" parent in combination with boundary ambiguity leads to maladaptive adjustments in the individual functioning of members (Riggs & Riggs, 2011). Elaborating on the working of the attachment network

model, Riggs and Riggs (2011), described scenarios of deployment in which the “at home” spouse had an ‘attachment avoidance’ type of insecure attachment. This type of insecurely attached spouse would resort to an ‘emotional cut-off’ from the deployed member to cope with the separated situation. The “cut-off” in which the family closes its boundaries and limits communication with the deployed member may enable the family members to function independently and reasonably well during deployments. However, these families encounter greater difficulties in the next phase of re-integration as family members at home refuse to let go of additional responsibilities taken on during the deployed parent’s absence or revert to previous family boundaries. On the other hand, in the scenario where a non-deployed parent has ‘high attachment anxiety’, and is not able to fill in for the roles of the absent member owing to over-dependency on the absent parent keep family boundaries as open or weak. Such families may face extensive disruptions and difficulties in functioning during deployment periods. In some cases, it may result in overdependency on elder children causing parent-child role reversals or enmeshment, such as “spousification” or “parentification” i.e., the parent turns to the child for companionship and intimacy defined as a “distortion in parent-child boundaries or lack of appropriate boundaries between family subsystems leading to functional or emotional role reversal wherein the child takes on adult responsibilities that are atypical of his or her developmental stage and age” (Riggs & Riggs, 2011; Hooper, 2007). Such situations have been observed in Indian families also wherein military wives from rural backgrounds tend to be overdependent on elder sons in the absence of service personnel and may lead to early parentification or spousification (Misra, 2019). Parentification has been linked with different outcomes like early maturation of children, role confusion, or taking on caregiving routines not typical of children (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Chandra, Lara-Cinisomo, et al., 2010; Chandra, Martin, et al., 2010; Huebner et al., 2007).

It has been seen that the absence of military parents negatively influences children’s relationships with their deployed parents (Farnsworth & O’Neal, 2021). The stress and anxiety of mothers negatively influences emotional availability to the children and subsequently the attachment security in the parent-child relationship (Posada et al., 2011; Tupper et al., 2018). Insecure attachment formation in mother-child relationships has been associated along with higher levels of internalizing and conduct problems (Tupper et al., 2020). Louie and Cromer’s (2014) study found that technological communications enabling meaningful parent-child bonding experiences, telephoning and video conferencing didn’t not significantly impact parent-child relationships in military families.

Future Implications

Future research studies should explore the attachment perspective in the unique ecosystem of the military context that can provide valuable insight into human development as the early years in the parent-child relationship serve as a source of emotional security which promotes

healthy development across developmental domains and the lifespan (Cabrera, 2020). Research on military children in different cultural and socioeconomic backdrops like India and other countries could provide further light on complexities in understanding different developmental paradigms. Military children in India are an under-researched population and future studies targeting attachment interventions would add to the military children-based research literature. For this, awareness about military culture and issues specific to the military population should also be incorporated into mainstream discussion and research.

Conclusion

Military service requirements coupled with the ambiguous presence of a deployed parent, and fear of parental injury or death due to combat, may cause disruptions in secure attachment formation during the developmental years of children's lives, which can adversely influence positive youth development into later periods of adolescent or adult life. Early attachment insecurity sets up negative patterns of maladaptive emotional and behavioural adjustments which can manifest themselves in the later arena of adult functioning. Potential prevention or intervention programs to better parenting skills should incorporate "attachment security" as a linking mechanism which mediates the impact of military stressors on adaptive functioning in military children. There is a necessity for policies to incorporate strengthening parent-child attachment as means of promoting resilience for children in military families all over the world. Creating policies which support family participation in intervention programs would be a proactive step to encourage families to access available resources.

Notes on the author

Rooma Sharma is currently pursuing her PhD in Psychology from the Institute of Integrated Learning in Management University, Gurugram. She has experience of being in the field of emotional support and counselling services to military families in India for the last ten years.

Undertaking by the author

The Article has been written originally by the author and information sourced has been duly acknowledged. The same has not been submitted anywhere else for publication or is under consideration or publication.

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