

EXPERIENCES OF MILITARY-CONNECTED CHILDREN: PERSPECTIVES OF MOTHERS, TEACHERS AND CHILDREN

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ABSTRACT

Increased conflicts in Nigeria, especially with current insurgent activities, have resulted in greater military service demands such as frequent and repeated deployments. Despite extant literature on the possible effects of deployments on children, little to no research has focused on the psychological experiences and outcomes of children from Nigerian military homes. This study explored the perspectives of stay-at home mothers, teachers of military-connected children (MCC) and MCC's with an aim to provide foundations for development of policy initiatives, interventions and future research.

In this qualitative study, nineteen in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions were conducted with purposively selected stay-at home mothers/wives of personnel, teachers of MCC's and MCC's in a military installation in Nigeria using semi-structured interview guides and focus group protocols. All interviews and discussions were conducted in English and transcribed verbatim.

Findings revealed the following: (a) MCC's are bold, resilient and many of them cope with the stressors associated with parental military service, (b) factors such as parent-child relationship, home environment, parental level of education, deployment frequency/duration, and serving parents' cadre were perceived as linked to child outcomes, (c) MCC's suffer fears associated with serving parents' military role, inability to meet parental expectations, fear of not fitting in and not being loved, (d) MCC's have unique behavioural and emotional challenges that may necessitate psychological intervention.

Participants recommended that MCC's may benefit from programs providing support at the school and community level as they face negative impact of parental military service.

Keywords: *Military-Connected Children; Nigeria; Military; Family; Deployment*

INTRODUCTION

Recent years have seen a dramatic increase in conflicts requiring the active involvement of military service members (Barker & Berry, 2009). The Nigerian military service became even more demanding with the activities of insurgents which became a trend from about the year 2009. Other conflicts such as farmer-herdsmen clashes, religious and ethnic clashes, etc., have become common place in Nigeria and have required the prompt involvement of military personnel to assist in quelling the conflict. Military service is thus, now highly characterized by combat related deployments that are extended, repeated, and sometimes associated with death or injury of its personnel. A good number of these service members have family responsibilities (i.e. spouse and/or children). These protracted conflicts and the military actions to contain it may expose the military family members especially the Military-Connected Child (MCC) to survival threatening challenges (Gorman, Eide, & Hisle-Gorman, 2010). The MCC is forced to experience significantly more and longer parental absence and neglect; as such military related activities may run through months to years of the family's development. These have led to increased concerns regarding the psychological experiences of MCC's (Coulthard, 2011). In Nigeria, little to nothing has been documented on the psychological and behavioural experiences of children from homes of serving military personnel as related to these increased military activities.

Many military studies tend to focus on combat and operational events as they relate to personnel (Lester, Peterson, Reeves, Knauss, Glover, Mogil., Duan, Saltzman, Pynoos, Wilt, & Beardslee, 2010), while research examining the effects of these events on family members especially children are less frequent. Furthermore, majority of studies conducted on the effect of parental military service on MCC's have relied on the perspectives of adults such as parents

and recent trends call for more evidence from the child's perspective (Flake, Davis, Johnson, & Middleton, 2009; Lester et al., 2010). This is because parents' assessments may be biased in terms of what they choose to disclose, their own well-being, their children's age, and their perceptions of the child primarily within the home context (Card, Bosch, Casper, Wiggs, Hawkins, Schlomer, & Borden, 2011; Flake et al., 2009). Moreover, research on both military and civilian samples have demonstrated that parent reports of children's experiences are usually different from children's self-reports (LopezPerez & Wilson, 2015). It is arguable then, that research on children's experiences from perspectives of the child and significant others such as teachers and parents is required because they may give a clearer and more accurate picture. The MCC may be best at judging his/her emotional states and experience, and as such, provide unique insights into their internalized distress (Card et al., 2011; Flake et al., 2009). Also, teachers of MCC's if engaged, may be in a good position to give insights into the child's behavioural, social and emotional functioning outside the home, as the child spends a good number of hours with teachers in the school setting. The parent's perception of the child's functioning on the home front may also be of particular importance.

While limited in nature, evidence from the United States and the United Kingdom reveal that parental military service especially during periods of conflicts, places a lot of strain on children from military homes, increasing the risk for behavioural health issues (Lester, Aralis, Sinclair, Kiff, Lee, Mustillo, & Wadsworth, 2016). Social and emotional adjustment problems in children have also been linked with parental military service especially as it relates to prolonged parental absence (Gorman, Eide & Hisle-Gorman, 2010; Barker & Berry, 2009). Attention has also been drawn by socio-ecological models to the important influence of processes at the family level to shape the child's environment and determine developmental outcomes (Bronfenbrenner, 2005; DeVoe & Ross, 2012). For the MCC, parental military service may pose challenges in various forms. Some of these as identified by literature are: worry and uncertainty associated with combat related deployments (Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass & Grass, 2007); lengthy separations that challenge coping resources resulting in separation anxiety problems (Lester et al., 2011); early exposure to adult roles (Weber & Weber, 2005); externalising and internalising behaviour symptoms (Card et. al., 2011); increased risk for emotional, behavioral and academic difficulties (Cederbaum, Gilreath, Benbenishty, Astor, Pineda, DePedro, 2014; Chartrand, Frank, White, & Shope, 2008).

Furthermore, it is also reasonable to believe that growing up in a military culture could also lead to some positive outcomes for these children. To help today's MCC's effectively cope with and adjust to the military life and experiences, it is important to identify both the negative and positive events they encounter within this context. Additionally, there is a critical need for more scholarly inquiry into the ways different social contexts affect a child's reality.

Present Study

Research investigating the influence of parental military service on experiences of MCC's in Nigeria is limited. A few studies have begun to explore the impact of the current trends in parental military service on child well-being, none has been identified to have examined how these MCC's are doing across behavioural, social, emotional, and academic domains. Furthermore, prior research has largely examined such experiences based on single reports (e.g. that of the care giving parent). It would be more advantageous if attempts are made to overcome these limitations by drawing information from important stakeholders as sources.

This study therefore sought to explore the experiences and perceived outcomes of children from Nigerian military homes from the perspectives of stay-at home mothers, teachers of MCC's, and MCC's with an aim at gaining accurate insight on their experiences (behaviour, social, emotional and academic) and related factors as linked to parental military service. The objective of the present study therefore is:

(a) to examine unique strengths of MCC's (b) to investigate problems/challenges MCC's face/manifest (Behavioural, Academic, Socially and Emotionally) (c) to examine factors that relate to MCC's strength and challenges (d) to investigate the support services/programs available to Nigerian MCC's in their context.

METHOD

Design

To address the study objectives, a qualitative design was used for this study. Qualitative methods allow a great deal of flexibility to pursue themes that emerge as the research progresses. In addition, they permit participants to reply questions without being constrained by predetermined response categories and, thereby, contribute toward a more detailed and in-depth exploration of opinions and perceptions about a research interest. On this basis, researchers identified, analysed and reported patterns (themes) within the data collected. Textual data were derived from two (2) focus group discussions (FGD's) and nineteen (19) semi- structured interviews with children from military families, stay-at home parents from military homes, and teachers from military-connected schools. The focus group and interview methodologies were chosen because they have the advantage of eliciting local, subjective perspectives of insiders about the topic in question, giving a 'voice' to the research participant and allowing him/her define what is relevant and important to his or her experience (Pranee, 2010).

Participants

Participants for the FGD's in this study consisted of eighteen (18) purposively sampled MCC's aged 11 to 16 years. For the interviews, five (5) MCC's (3 females, two males), six (6) parents (all females) and eight (8) teachers of MCC's (6 females, 2 males) were conveniently sampled. Participants were drawn from two military cantonments in Nigeria. All the children in the study (n= 23), had fathers as serving personnel in the military. The parents (n=6), were all stay-at home mothers of MCC's and teachers (n=8), were teachers in military secondary schools. Interviewees were drawn by adopting the snowballing technique, as a contact with one participant lead to the contact with another. The participants for the FGD's were purposively drawn from a military day secondary school. To ensure that participants in the focus groups were homogeneous, which may allow for more conversational flow (Vaughn, Schumm & Sinagub, 1996), two sets of focus groups were established: a younger group with children aged 11-13 (n=8) and an older age group with children 14-16 years (n=10). See Table 1 for demographics characteristics of participants.

Instruments

Researchers developed a semi structured interview guide and focus group protocol to aid the gathering of relevant qualitative data in the IDI's and FGD's of this study. Open-ended questions were structured in a way to answer research objectives on strengths, experiences and challenges of military-connected children. Parallel interview guides were used for the teachers of MCC's, stay-at-home parents and MCC's in this study.

Procedure

The study was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the Nigerian Defence Academy. Participants were given informed consent information at the beginning of the IDI's and FGD's and individuals could choose whether to participate or not. No compensation was given for participation. Interviews took about 50 minutes for each participant and FGD's took approximately 120 minutes each. All interviews and discussions were conducted in English and transcribed verbatim.

The data obtained were analysed by the thematic analytic approach. Themes were identified that emerged from responses. After themes were identified, responses were reviewed again to ensure that the themes accurately represented respondents' perspectives (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). All themes identified from the qualitative responses are reported in the findings.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of Participants of FGD's and IDI's

	AGE			GENDER	
	11-13yrs	14-16yrs	Adults	Male	Female
FGD1 (8)	8	-	-	5	3
FGD2 (10)	-	10	-	4	6
MCC IDI's (5)	2	3	-	2	3
Teacher's IDI's (8)	-	-	8	2	6
Parent's IDI's (6)	-	-	6	-	6
Total (N=37)	10	13	14	13	24
%	27%	35.1%	37.8%	35.1%	64.9%

Source: Field work 2018

Table 1 shows the frequency distribution of the demographic characteristics of participants in the two focus group discussions and nineteen IDI's. From the table, it is revealed that a total of 37 individuals were participants of this study in both FGD and IDI's. Of these, 13 (35.1%) were males, while 24 (64.9%) were females. Also considering their ages, 10 (27%) were of the age range 11-13yrs, 13 (35.1%) were between the ages of 14-16yrs, while 14 (37.8%) were adults.

Theme 1: Military-Connected children have many areas of strengths

The first aim of this study was to explore if MCC's have unique areas of strengths, and identify those strengths. A significant number of the study's participants (in both IDI's and FGD) reported that this group of children have many strengths. With specific reference to the strengths, most of the participants reported that, MCC's are very bold/confident, independent, risk takers, intelligent, adapt easily to situations, outspoken, physically strong have a mind of their own, resilient and do well under pressure. Below are excerpts from the study:

These children can do anything, they fear no one and nothing. They can stand up for themselves in any instance. The environment encourages doggedness and strength. If they are on their own, it is often not a problem because they are used to it and can handle situations. In my classes I have quite a number and all of them show this trait of being very bold. If you are looking for someone who will lead a group, they likely will want to do so.

IDI 3: Teacher, Female

As children who are from the barracks, we are strong and very good in sports. We watch our parents do fatigue and sometimes we join them. It's just a normal thing. 'Military injection' moves us and we cannot fear. We have the mind. I am one of the runners for my school and many other children like that. We are not dull. Anything, we can do it.

IDI 11: MCC, Male, 15yrs

Children from military homes, I can say are very intelligent, very sure of themselves and not afraid. They can do what others do not dare to do. From my experience, they are very determined. They handle situations well and are good talkers. They ask questions a lot because they are interested in knowing and doing things for themselves. I think it is because they are used to doing things by themselves. They grow up fast.

IDI 15: Parent, Female

In the two focused group discussions conducted, many of the respondents reported that MCC's strengths include ability to stand up for themselves, smart and able to think out of the box, very strong, fearless, hardworking, smart/neat dressers, good with physical activities like sports and can stand up for their rights.

Theme 2: Behavioural, Social, Emotional Challenges

On the question as to if MCC's face or manifest any problems or challenges, many of the study's participants discussed the challenges of MCC's reporting a number of behavioural, social and emotional problems. Seven teachers (87.5%) and 4 mothers (66.6%) report that these children suffer and manifest a number of problems that could be linked to their unique situation. Many of the MCC participants also report experiencing and observing a number of problems among MCC's. Teachers reported that these children exhibit signs of being forceful, having a tendency to lie a lot, anger problems, difficulty to conform to standards and rules, getting into one conflict or the other, acting out, bullying their peers and gang behaviours. Sometimes they are destructive, appearing unkempt in outlook, and verbally aggressive. Some also report that these children get into fights, do poorly in their academics, do not care for the feelings of others, are sometimes withdrawn or anxious and show signs of poor self-esteem.

Parent participants in their discussions, mentioned that these group of children face challenges of stubbornness, behaving in wild manners, getting into conflicts and have bouts of sad moods. In the discussions with MCC's, they report feelings of anxiety, feelings of not being understood, not fitting in or not belonging, feelings of being unloved, labeled and judged, having fears of the unknown, fears of not meeting up to standards, feelings of being inferior, anger problems, sleep problems, physical and verbal aggression and poor self-control are some of the challenges and problems MCC's face.

Below is an excerpt from some of the interviewees:

These children can be very rough. They get into fights and insult others so easily. They are more disciplined when they are in the barrack setting, because of the restrictions and sanctions they may receive within when they misbehave. When they go outside they misbehave more. These children often exhibit destructive ways, although not all of them. Some of them could be calm and obedient. It actually depends on the family situation. Some of them are dirty and unkempt. Especially children of personnel in the lower cadre.

IDI 1: Teacher, Male

The barrack child does not care what you think about him. He does what is on his mind. People often give us names before they even meet us, so we do not try to please

anybody. Sometimes they look for your trouble, so you show them who you are and that you cannot be treated anyhow. Yes, children of soldiers fight a lot, sometimes you just want to prove a point to them that you deserve to be respected. Many times you are misjudged and also you are angry at somethings. I think we have many inner fears and feelings of not being able to do all you are expected to. The expectations are many and you do not want to fail your parents. It can be very disturbing and sometimes you feel sad and not loved.

IDI 10: MCC, Female, 16years

Generally, children from homes of serving personnel can be a bit forward and forceful. I guess they fight because they have the energy and are strong. They can be stubborn too and want to have their way most times. They experience sad moods and worry sometimes and keep to themselves Some people say barrack girls are wayward and get sexually aware very early. I think it isn't all of them and it depends on the environment, the home and the parents.

IDI 19: Parent, Female

Theme 3: Factors that are associated with these challenges faced by MCC's

When participants were asked what factors they thought were associated with the problems experienced and manifested by MCC's, a significant number of them reported that the following were important factors that could be linked to the development of these problems. They claimed that the cadre of serving parent (as many of the problems were said to be more pronounced in children of the rank and file), increased deployment rates of serving parent particularly to conflict areas, frequency of conflicts in the country (increasing their fears and uncertainty), poor communication in parent-child relationships, family conditions (especially with tension between parents), conflicts and abuse within the home, and maternal factors (such as educational level, her psychological health and socio-economic status).

Also, the corruption and moral decadence in the society, a recent deployment of the serving parent, presence or absence of the serving parent (most times the father), individual characteristics of the MCC, their accommodation facilities/place of residence, level of deprivation of the MCC, the MCC's family size, mingling with peers of the same type (barrack setting reinforces some of these behaviours), parental neglect and attitude as well as home training were considered very important to the manifestation of these problems. A number of the respondents did not think that gender was important, as both males and females manifested most of the problems. While a few respondents thought that males exhibit their problem behaviours differently from females. Also some participants said age differences existed in the manifestation of these problems while others said it did not. Some participants reported that the adolescent age was most prominent for the development of such problems and a number of them lose the behaviours and become tamer as they grow older. A few participants claimed that residence within the barrack was a huge determinant of MCC's developing some of these problems.

Below are excerpts from the interviews:

A military child is a military child whether male or female. They face the same pressures and show similar problems. The younger ones are not yet very aware of their environment so they manifest less of the problems. There are obvious differences though between the children of soldiers and the children of officers. You can tell the difference even from just seeing them. The absence of the father figure is very important as most mothers lack the ability to control these children so they go about doing anything they like and picking up very bad behaviours in the barrack. Many of the rank and file also have large families they cannot cater for, they live in small shared accommodations so these children have to fend for themselves a lot and don't have many of their needs met. If you ask some of them why they didn't come to school, they say they went the farm. Many tend people's farms to get paid. Another issue is the nonchalance of the parents towards their academics and this affects the child's own behaviour and attitude too. They marry uneducated women who do not know much themselves and cannot care properly for the children. This adds to the problem. Some mothers will tell you they have not seen their husbands for 3years. It is bound to have an effect.

IDI 8: Teacher, Female

The soldier's child faces most of these because there is a big difference between a child of a soldier and a child of an officer. The soldier's child is more tough and rugged. They live in different living conditions, they experience more hardship than the officer's child who is more exposed and lives a better life. Again the soldier faces more of the hazards of military service than the officer. Another thing is the standards the parent has set for the child and they know what will happen if they do not meet it, it makes them feel afraid and sometimes as if they are not loved. Again, the fear of losing your father, who will take care of you? Every day we hear of what Boko Haram is doing to the soldiers and we fear that our father may not return. Some children follow bad group and copy what the group is doing, taking drugs and getting into fights inside and outside the barrack

IDI 12: MCC, Female, 14years

We have to care for our children by ourselves most times. Some wives do not see their husbands for a long time and have to be mother, father and everything. It is not easy and only one person cannot handle all of this. Some children only fear their father; they don't listen to their mother any more. Especially the males because they think they are the men of the house in their father's absence and can do what they want. Some are just stubborn. Also the recent fights everywhere in the country are making our husbands stay away from home longer and making things more difficult. But it is the work that he is paid to do so what can we do?

IDI 18: Parent, Female

Theme 3: Support systems, programs and services that are available to help MCC's have better outcomes and handle these problems

Most of the participants in this study claim there is little to no support available for these children, when they were asked the question relating to this. On further probing, they report that most of the support, effort and coping resources to assist alleviate these issues are at the individual and home level. School teachers also make some effort in terms of working with the child and liaising with parents if they are available. A few of the respondents also noted that once in a while the women body of wives of personnel (e.g. Nigerian Army Officers Wives Association – NAOWA; Nigerian Airforce Officers Wives Association NAFOWA), try to organise some programs, workshops, skill development and parties for MCC's to give them a sense of belonging, ease off their stresses and to give them skills to keep them busy and out of trouble. They also observe that these programs were far between and often for a few privileged ones. A respondent also observed that there were health insurance schemes that catered for their ill health in terms of finances. Also it was reported that sermons in religious places of worship were preached to help reduce the occurrence of such behaviours.

At the individual level, respondents claimed that MCC's handle their problems by talking to others (pastor, friends, mothers, relations). Some resort to drugs to ease their tension, while others claimed they pray. Some others reported that they pretend they are not bothered in order to feel a bit better. The parent participants of this study claim that at the home level MCC's were supported and helped by continuous guidance, scolding and punishment. When situations were too difficult to handle, a child could be locked up in the guard room by soldiers. A number of teachers in this study reported that there were some guidance counsellors in their schools who tried to assist these children when there were serious problems. Corporal punishment was another technique that was very much in use to correct these children. Schools also used sporting and club activities to engage these children and help them focus and forget their worries.

Below is an excerpt from the study's interviews:

There is nothing like support for the children of military personnel. They handle their problems themselves and within their family. I talk to my mother when I feel bad, sad and when I am anxious or worried. She advises me and prays with me. Sometimes I engage in sports, and other activities to keep me busy and out of trouble. Some people I know mix with friends to relieve them from their troubles but it often worsens it because they teach them bad things such as drinking and smoking. It will be nice if we have programs specially arranged to handle our problems and to teach our parents how to communicate with us better. My father often just shouts and gives out orders without listening. Teaching military parents how to communicate with their children may be helpful.

IDI 11: MCC, Male, 15yrs

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore psychological experiences and outcomes of children from Nigerian military homes. The study specifically, set out to examine the strengths and challenges of this population, factors that are related to these challenges and support services and programs available to them, using qualitative methods as there was no study in the context found to have examined these. To achieve these objectives, nineteen in-depth interviews and two focus group discussions were conducted to elicit information from the respondents. Each of the themes identified across this sample are instructive for psychologists, other mental health service providers and all stake holders involved with MCC's and their families. For example, the changing availability of social support, the impact of stressors in the military context and the gross unavailability of effective support services and programs for this population were some of the most widely discussed issues among the respondents. Targeted help needs to be developed to handle some of these issues.

The findings of the study revealed that, MCC's have a number of strengths that may be harnessed to assist them handle their problems and improve their outcomes. Strengths such as being fearless, confident, smart and independent risk takers who easily adjust and cope with situations were some important strengths that were identified in the study.

Furthermore, significant number of respondents in this study stated that this population was prone to behavioural and emotional problems. Some salient ones identified were, MCC's act out, getting into fights frequently, bully their peers and finding it difficult to conform to standards and rules. Some report poor academic performance among this population. These findings agree with Lester et. al., 2016, Card et. al., 2011 and Cederbaum et al., 2014. These researchers state that MCC's may be at high risk for developing behavioural health problems as well as increased risk for emotional and academic difficulties.

This study also identifies the lack of care for the feelings of others, anxiety, mood and social withdrawal problems as some of the emotional challenges this population may face.

Sleep problems, physical and verbal aggression and poor self-control were also identified. Further discussions also revealed experiences of feelings of uncertainty and fears among MCC's. These are also in line with the findings of Chartrand et.al., (2008) and Huebner et. al., (2007). They explain that parental military service and particularly combat related deployments are sources of fears, uncertainty, feelings of loss and worry for MCC's. These children fear the possible death or injure of their serving parent (as some deployments may be combat related). Also they worry about not meeting the high expectations and standards set for them. It may be particularly important to quantitatively assess these findings to examine their significance. The current study demonstrates the importance of family systems and the ecological system in understanding the experiences of children (DeVoe & Ross, 2012; Bronfenbrenner, 2005) from military homes, as most factors identified by study's participants as linked with existing problems are all set in the child's family system and environment.

In addition, it was found that support available for this unique population are grossly inadequate and the few in place are not very effective. Participants of the study suggest that MCC's may benefit from programs providing support at the school and community level as well as those targeting their parents. Also, a good understanding of the military culture may be particularly helpful in developing effective programs of support for this unique population.

Limitations

This study is not without limitations, firstly the sample was small and only a few interviews and focus group discussions were conducted. Also, only two military cantonments were sampled thus limiting findings of the study. Further studies should be replicated with a wider sample so generalisation to a larger group may be made possible. Additionally, researcher was declined audio recording of interviews by participants as they were skeptical about their voices been heard and possibly identified. This may affect verbatim transcription of discussions as they had to be hand written from start to finish as discussions went on. Despite these limitations, this study has implications for further research, policy and intervention

Recommendations

Based on the above findings of this study, it is recommended that:

- Further research be carried out to substantiate quantitatively the findings of this study in this context
- Families, schools, community and government should make adequate effort to provide the required support for this population to reduce negative outcomes
- Psychologists and other mental health professionals need to develop targeted programs to tackle some of these problems of MCC's as identified. Operation of such programs may be targeted at the school and community levels in order to tackle problems even before they begin to manifest.

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