



Attachment Patterns, Coping Mechanisms, And Psychological Well-Beings: A Comparative Study Of Civilians And Defence Personnel Children

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Abstract: Adolescents' psychological adjustment and overall well-being are influenced by attachment relationships and coping mechanisms. Due to being impacted by things such as parental deployment, frequent relocation, and parents being temporarily separated from them, children of defence personnel are more frequently thought to be at higher psychological risk than other children.

Despite these assumptions, empirical research does not support this assumption with inconsistent findings. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate attachment relationships, coping mechanisms, and psychological well-being among adolescents from both civilian and defence families. Quantitative cross-sectional data (comparing two groups of children) were collected. The sample included 30 children of defence personnel compared to 30 civilians (aged 14 - 18). The samples were compared using independent sample t-tests on the following standardized measures: Attachment Style, Brief COPE, and Psychological Well-Being (PWI) measures.

No statistically significant differences were found between civilian versus defence personnel children regarding attachment, coping mechanisms, or psychological well-being. Thus, the findings suggest that a parent's occupational background does not solely determine the emotional adjustment of adolescents.

This research highlights the role of familial and social supports in promoting adolescent well-being.

Keywords: attachment style, coping mechanisms, psychological well-being, adolescents, defence families.

I. INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is an important time for growth and change, occurring primarily in three areas: Emotional, Cognitive and social. During this time, young people will develop ways of managing their emotions and build strong relationships with others and develop a sense of who they are as individuals. Family dynamics and relationships with parents play an important role in the adolescent's developing psychologically.

Based on attachment theory, the way infants interact with their parents affects how they manage their emotions, build relationships, and cope with the stresses of life as they grow into adulthood. A secure attachment to a parent builds a resilient ability to cope with stress, while developing a secure attachment reduces a young person's vulnerability to mental illness.

Military children frequently relocate, have parents who are deployed and face temporary separation from caregivers, giving them an unusual environment in which they grow up. While many believe these factors lead to emotional difficulties, some research indicates that children in military families often gain resilience, adaptability and independence through structured lifestyles and a strong support network within their community.

Adolescents' ability to cope with stress relies heavily on the type of coping strategies they have developed. Effective coping strategies allow individuals to manage their emotional responses and adapt to the difficulties of life. Another area to consider is the psychological wellbeing of adolescents - including their emotional functioning, satisfaction with life, and positive relationships - because each of these areas is a contributing factor to an adolescent's development.

While research on military families is growing, little research specifically compares adolescents from civilian and military families with respect to attachment, coping skills, and psychological well-being. It is necessary to understand the differences between civilian and military adolescents in order to develop appropriate support systems for all adolescents regardless of their family background.

Review of Literature

Attachment theory provides a foundational framework for understanding adolescents' emotional development. According to John Bowlby (1969), early interactions with caregivers shape internal working models that influence emotional regulation, relationships, and coping across the lifespan. Mary Ainsworth (1978) further identified secure and insecure attachment patterns, demonstrating that securely attached individuals tend to exhibit better emotional adjustment and resilience. Research has consistently shown that secure attachment in adolescence is associated with higher self-esteem, effective coping strategies, and better psychological well-being.

Adolescents from defence families are often exposed to unique environmental stressors such as parental deployment, frequent relocations, and temporary separation from caregivers. Studies examining military-connected children present mixed findings. Some research suggests that deployment-related stress may lead to emotional and behavioural difficulties, including anxiety, depression, and adjustment problems, particularly during periods of separation and reintegration (Creech et al., 2014; Lester et al., 2016). These disruptions may affect family functioning and attachment security.

However, other studies highlight the presence of resilience among defence children. Structured family environments, strong community support systems, and adaptive family routines have been found to buffer the negative effects of deployment-related stress. Research indicates that children who experience consistent emotional support and stable caregiving, even in the context of military life, demonstrate positive psychological adjustment and adaptability.

Coping mechanisms also play a crucial role in adolescents' psychological functioning. According to the transactional model proposed by Richard Lazarus and Susan Folkman (1984), coping involves cognitive and behavioural efforts to manage stress. Securely attached adolescents are more likely to use adaptive coping strategies such as problem-solving and seeking social support, whereas insecure attachment is associated with maladaptive coping strategies such as avoidance and emotional suppression. Effective coping has been linked to better emotional regulation and reduced psychological distress.

Psychological well-being, as conceptualized by Carol Ryff (1989), includes dimensions such as autonomy, personal growth, purpose in life, self-acceptance, and positive relationships. Research suggests that both attachment security and adaptive coping strategies contribute significantly to higher levels of psychological well-being in adolescents.

Despite the growing body of literature, findings regarding defence and civilian adolescents remain inconsistent. While some studies emphasize risk factors associated with military life, others highlight resilience and adaptability. Moreover, there is a lack of integrated research examining attachment patterns, coping mechanisms, and psychological well-being simultaneously within a comparative framework. This gap is particularly evident in the Indian context, where limited empirical studies have explored these variables among defence and civilian populations.

Therefore, the present study seeks to address this gap by comparatively examining attachment styles, coping mechanisms, and psychological well-being among adolescents from civilian and defence families.

Rationale

Family conditions experienced by children of defence personnel differ significantly from those of civilian children due to factors such as parental deployment, frequent relocations, and temporary separation from caregivers. These experiences may influence the development of unique coping mechanisms; while some adolescents may face emotional challenges, others may develop resilience, adaptability, and independence. Understanding how these environmental factors shape attachment styles, coping strategies, and psychological well-being is essential for designing effective educational and psychological interventions.

Although psychological adjustment among children from military backgrounds has been explored in previous research, much of the existing literature has primarily focused on deployment-related stress and behavioural problems. There is a lack of comprehensive studies that simultaneously examine attachment styles, coping mechanisms, and psychological well-being within the same framework. Additionally, very few studies, particularly in the Indian context, have conducted a direct comparison between adolescents from defence and civilian families using standardized measures.

Therefore, there exists a clear research gap in understanding whether adolescents from these two backgrounds differ in terms of emotional adjustment and coping patterns. The present study aims to address this gap by providing empirical evidence on attachment styles, coping strategies, and psychological well-being among civilian and defence adolescents. This comparative approach seeks to offer deeper insights into the extent to which parental occupational background influences adolescents' emotional development and psychological functioning.

Objective of the study

1. To assess the difference on attachment styles between civilian children and children of defence personnel.
2. To assess the difference on coping mechanisms between civilian children and children of defence personnel.
3. To assess the difference on psychological well-being between civilian children and children of defence personnel.

Methodology

Sample

For the present study, a total of 60 adolescents were selected using a purposive sampling technique. The sample comprised two groups: 30 adolescents from civilian families and 30 adolescents who were children of defence personnel. Participants were recruited from different regions across India, ensuring representation from diverse geographical and cultural backgrounds. This diversity allowed for a broader understanding of adolescent experiences across varying socio-cultural contexts. The sample included adolescents from different educational institutions and socio-economic backgrounds, contributing to heterogeneity in life experiences, family environments, and social exposures. Such diversity was considered important in order to enhance the generalizability of the findings and to capture variations in attachment patterns, coping strategies, and psychological well-being across different cultural settings.

The inclusion criteria for the participants were:

1. Adolescents aged between 14–18 years,
2. Belonging either to civilian families or families of defence personnel,
3. Currently enrolled in school or equivalent educational institutions.

The exclusion criteria were:

1. Adolescents below 14 years
2. Presence of any diagnosed psychiatric illness or severe psychological disorder,
3. Incomplete or inconsistent responses on the administered measures.

Measures

Attachment Style Scale

Attachment style was assessed using the Attachment Style Questionnaire – Short Form (ASQ-SF) developed by Alexander, Feeney, Hohaus, and Noller (2001). The ASQ-SF consists of 29 items designed to measure individual differences in attachment patterns in close relationships.

The scale assesses dimensions related to security, avoidance, and anxiety in interpersonal relationships, reflecting emotional closeness, trust, dependency, and fear of rejection.

Participants were asked to rate each item on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree), indicating the extent to which each statement reflects their thoughts and feelings. Certain items are reverse scored as per the scoring guidelines.

Higher scores on respective dimensions indicate stronger tendencies toward specific attachment styles (e.g., secure, anxious, or avoidant). The ASQ-SF has demonstrated satisfactory reliability and validity in previous research.

Brief COPE Scale

Coping strategies were assessed using the Brief COPE Scale developed by Carver (1997). The scale comprises 28 items that measure a broad range of coping responses individuals use when dealing with stress.

The instrument assesses multiple coping dimensions, including problem-focused coping, emotion-focused coping, and avoidant coping strategies.

Participants rated each item on a 4-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (I haven't been doing this at all) to 4 (I've been doing this a lot).

Higher scores on specific subscales indicate greater use of that particular coping strategy. The Brief COPE has been widely used and has demonstrated adequate reliability and validity across diverse populations.

Psychological Well-Being Scale

Psychological well-being was assessed using a standardized Psychological Well-Being Scale based on Ryff's model (1989). The scale measures key dimensions of well-being, including autonomy, environmental mastery, personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance.

Participants responded to items on a Likert-type scale indicating the extent to which each statement applied to them. Higher scores reflect higher levels of psychological well-being. The scale has been extensively validated and shows good psychometric properties in adolescent and adult populations.

RESULTS

The present study aimed to examine differences in attachment style, coping mechanisms, and psychological well-being between adolescents from civilian families and children of defence personnel. Independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare the two groups on the study variables. The results are presented below.

Table 1 presents the comparison of attachment style scores between civilian children and children of defence personnel.

Table 1

Independent Samples t-Test for Attachment Style

Variables	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Attachment Style	-0.096	58	0.924	-0.03

The results indicated that there was **no statistically significant difference** in attachment style between civilian adolescents and children of defence personnel, $t(58) = -0.096$, $p = 0.924$. This suggests that both groups exhibit similar attachment patterns.

Table 2

Independent Samples t-Test for Coping Mechanisms

Variables	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Coping mechanisms	0.656	58	0.515	0.17

The findings revealed **no statistically significant difference** in coping mechanisms between the two groups, $t(58) = 0.656$, $p = 0.515$. This indicates that adolescents from both backgrounds utilize comparable coping strategies.

Table 3

Independent Samples t-Test for Psychological Well-Being

Variables	t	df	p	Cohen's d
Psychological Well-Being	-0.583	58	0.562	-0.15

The results showed **no statistically significant difference** in psychological well-being between civilian adolescents and children of defence personnel, $t(58) = -0.583$, $p = 0.562$. This suggests that overall levels of psychological well-being are similar across both groups.

Overall, the findings indicate that there are no significant differences between adolescents from civilian and defence backgrounds across attachment style, coping mechanisms, and psychological well-being. These results suggest that parental occupational background may not play a determining role in adolescents' emotional and psychological adjustment.

Discussion

The current research explored attachment styles, coping styles, and psychological health in non-military and military family youth. In total, no statistically significant differences between youth in the two-family types emerged across the dependent variables for either groups of youth.

From these findings, it appears that an adolescent's parental career does not influence his or her emotional adjustment. Attachment Theory specifies that emotional development is primarily dependent upon the quality of the caregiver relationship rather than on the occupational background of the caregiver. Although youth who come from military families may also experience a secure attachment from their caregiver if the caregiver continues to provide emotional responses and supportive behaviours.

Resilience theory may be used to support the findings. Defence families frequently have routines and social networks that are consistent and structured and may assist adolescents adjust to changes in their surroundings, like when relocating and/or when their parent is away; these will provide adolescents with protection for psychological adjustment in the presence of the many potential stressors produced by moving.

Also, coping strategies can develop as a result of shared experiences here at school, through peer interactions and/or as a result of family relationships, and thus these shared influences during child development may account for the similarities of defence versus civilian children.

Overall, it is clearly evident that the development of a comprehensive supportive family structure and stable social contexts are essential for the psychological well-being of adolescents.

Implication

The findings challenge the common assumption that children of defence personnel are at higher psychological risk, suggesting that parental occupation alone does not determine adolescent psychological outcomes. The results highlight the importance of quality of parent-child relationships and emotional support systems in shaping attachment, coping, and well-being among adolescents. Mental health professionals and counsellors should focus on developing adaptive coping strategies and emotional regulation skills in adolescents across both civilian and defence backgrounds. Schools and educational institutions can play a significant role by creating supportive and inclusive environments that promote resilience, peer support, and psychological well-being for all students. The study supports a strength-based perspective, indicating that adolescents from defence families can develop resilience and adaptability, which can be utilized in designing positive intervention programs.

Limitations

The study was conducted on a relatively small sample size which may limit the generalizability of the findings to a larger population.

The use of a cross-sectional research design restricts the ability to establish causal relationships or observe changes in attachment, coping, and well-being over time. The study relied on self-report measures, which may be subject to response bias, social desirability, and subjective interpretation by participants. Important contextual variables such as parental deployment duration, frequency of relocation, socio-economic status, and family dynamics were not considered, which may influence psychological outcomes. The study assessed overall coping mechanisms rather than examining specific coping styles in detail, which may limit deeper understanding of how adolescents manage stress.

CONCLUSION

The present study examined differences in attachment styles, coping mechanisms, and psychological well-being among adolescents from civilian and defence families. The findings revealed no statistically significant differences between the two groups across all variables, indicating that parental occupational background does not independently influence adolescents' emotional and psychological adjustment.

These results underscore the importance of relational and environmental factors, such as quality of caregiving, family support, peer interactions, and social context, in shaping adolescent development. The findings also support a strength-based perspective, suggesting that adolescents from defence families demonstrate comparable levels of resilience, coping, and well-being as their civilian counterparts.

Overall, the study contributes to the existing literature by emphasizing that adolescent psychological functioning is a result of complex, multifactorial influences, rather than being determined by a single contextual factor such as parental occupation.

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