Parentification in Deployed and Non-Deployed Military Families: A Preliminary Assessment

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this study is to investigate the differences in parentification in military families with a deployed parent and without a deployed parent. Parentification has been defined as a parent-child relationship in which the child is given roles and responsibilities that are inappropriate for the child’s developmental level. Previous research has highlighted increased rates of parentification in situations involving parental absence or unavailability, such as divorce, parental illness, parental alcoholism, and domestic violence. This construct was assessed using the Parentification Questionnaire – Youth, a 20 item self-report survey for children and adolescents. Participants consisted of 22 children, ages 7-17, from military families with a deployed parent and military families without a deployed parent. After removing two statistical outliers from the intact military families group, an independent samples t-test was conducted. It was found that there was a significant difference between military families with a deployed parent and military families without a deployed parent. In summary, military families with a deployed parent had higher rates of parentification than military families without a deployed parent. Limitations of the present study include small sample size, external influences through the possible presence of one or both parents during the questionnaire, and the lack of control groups. Future research should expand the sample size, extend the study to more family groups (i.e. civilian, divorced, separated by work), and explore the possibility of positive or negative impacts of parentification on military children from families separated by deployment.

KEYWORDS: parentification, military children, deployment

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INTRODUCTION

The structure of a family system may be affected by disruptive events such as parental or sibling illness, divorce, parental alcohol abuse, parental psychopathology, or domestic violence. One outcome that has been studied in these situations is parentification. The term parentification refers to a phenomenon in which the child is given roles or responsibilities within the family system before they are emotionally or developmentally ready for such roles (Chase, 1999; Jurkovic, 1997; Jurkovic, Thirkield, & Morrell, 2001; Kelley et al., 2007; Peris, Goeké-Morey, Cummings, & Emery, 2008). Despite the existing knowledge of this construct and past research addressing the effects of parentification, little research on parentification has been conducted with military families.

A significant proportion of the parentification literature addresses high rates of parentification in families coping with divorce or parental alcohol abuse (Chase, 1999; Chase, Deming, & Wells, 1998; Clarke-Stewart, Vandell, McCartney, Owen, & Booth, 2000; Earley & Cushway, 2002; Godsall, Jurkovic, Emshoff, Anderson, & Stanwyck, 2004; Goglia, 1992; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 1999; Hooper, Doehler, Jankowski, & Tomek, 2012; Jurkovic et al., 2001; Kelley et al., 2007; Lansford, 2009; Pasternak & Schier, 2012; Peris & Emery, 2005; Peris et al., 2008; Schick, 2002; Sentse, Ormel, Veenstra, Verhulst, & Oldehinkel, 2011; Stadelmann, Perren, Groeben, & Klitzing, 2010; Wallerstein, Lewis, & Packer-Rosenthal, 2013). The families in these studies are related in that there is a high level of parental unavailability or absence, which is also the case in military families with a deployed parent. According to Lester et al. (2011), there are in excess of two million children with one or both parents employed by the military. In 2007, the American Psychological Association (APA) Presidential Task Force reported that 700,000 children in military families in the U.S. had at least one parent deployed. In order to address the needs of numerous military children and the military family due to a deployment at least thirty days prior and 2) two-parent military families in which neither parent has been deployed for at least ninety days and are not known to be deploying or re-deploying for the next six months. These two phases of military life have been defined as “deployment,” in which the soldier has been deployed for one month or 30 days, and “postdeployment,” in which the soldier has lived at home for three to six months and is not re-deploying (Pincus, House, Christenson, & Alder, 2005).

Parentification and Military Families

Despite the deluge of research that has focused on parentification and the various familial stressors that can instigate the process, there has been little investigation of this process within military families. As previously mentioned, these families face similar stressors as families coping with divorce and parental alcoholism, such as parental unavailability or absence and new roles and responsibilities to fill. As parentification often arises out of a situation or stressor that overextends the
resources of the family system (Jurkovic, 1997), it can be argued that military families are at a high risk of parentification, especially those in the current wartime era. Since 2003, over two million service men and women have deployed for Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), and over 100,000 of them have children (DOD, 2010). These military operations overseas have resulted in an increase in combat deployments, multiple and prolonged deployments, decreased “dwell time,” and an increase in survival of severe wounds or injuries (DOD, 2010). All of these stressors may impact family functioning in various ways.

Deployments function in a cyclical pattern consisting of stages: pre-deployment, deployment, sustainment, redeployment, and post-deployment or reintegration (DOD, 2010; Pincus et al., 2005). Between deployments, the service men or women receive an allotted period of “dwell time” in which they return home. Previous dwell times were usually 18-24 months long, but in the current era soldiers are receiving only 9-12 months of dwell time (Paley et al., 2013). This means that the family must reintegrate for less than one year and then reallocate various familial roles and responsibilities as the parent re-deploys. It has been postulated that military families in this era thus suffer additional stress as they may be dealing with issues from a previous reintegration while additionally preparing for the next deployment cycle (Paley et al., 2013). In addition to decreased dwell time, at least 48% of the one million parents in the military have served at least two tours of duty (DOD, 2010). Furthermore, there is a high amount of ambiguity and uncertainty associated with multiple and prolonged combat deployments, especially when paired with the unpredictable nature of current deployments (DOD, 2010; Lincoln, Swift, & Shorteno-Fraser, 2008; Paley, Lester, & Mogil, 2013). In Werler and McGrath’s (1991) study on at-home spouses of the Persian Gulf War, at-home spouses reported high levels of insomnia and anxiety and 62% of participants expressed a need for additional overall support. At the same time, it is worth noting that families who had experienced multiple deployments also reported increased feelings of pride in their deployed spouse. Research conducted with OIF/OEF at-home spouses identified almost half of the at-home parents as reporting clinically significant levels of “parenting stress” (Flake, Davis, Johnson, & Middleton, 2009). These feelings of anxiety, stress, and uncertainty in combination with a need for more support may feasibly lead the at-home parent to rely on the child for emotional or physical support that they are not equipped to give, resulting in parentification.

Much of the research on the effects of military deployment on the at-home family has addressed the concepts of “role-reversal” and “boundary dissolution” (Easterbrooks et al., Ginsberg, & Lerner, 2013; Huebner & Mancini, 2005; Huebner, Mancini, Wilcox, Grass, & Grass, 2007; Paley et al., 2013). When a parent is deployed, the family must reassign their roles and responsibilities to other family members. While this may lead to growth, maturity, and pride in the child if the responsibilities are appropriate and supported by the at-home parent (Card et al., 2011), these increased roles and responsibilities can also lead to anxiety, emotional uncertainty and ambiguity, and depressive symptoms (Card et al., 2011; DOD, 2010; Easterbrooks et al., 2013; Huebner & Mancini, 2005). In a study on post-war adolescents in Bosnia, for example, perceived unfairness of extra roles and responsibilities directly related to emotional distress scores, correlating greater unfairness to greater emotional distress (Jurkovic, Kuperminc, Sarac, & Weisshaar, 2005).

Boundary ambiguity is used to describe the changes in roles and responsibilities following deployment, such as caring for siblings or serving as confidant to the at-home parent (Huebner et al., 2007). During the beginning of deployment, the child may already be experiencing stress, among other symptoms of anxiety and sadness, from the absence of a parent (Flake et al., 2009). These researchers additionally found that 1 in 3 children were at risk for psychosocial morbidity (i.e., physical, emotional, or cognitive dysfunction) during combat deployment of one of their parents. Symptoms and stressors may be exacerbated by the knowledge of the potential for the deployed parent to be killed or severely injured (Lincoln et al., 2008). Knowledge about the risks of war is more readily available to children in the form of media coverage, which is often construed and dramatized, and may generate increased levels of fear (Huebner & Mancini, 2005).

In addition, military families have reported that the most stressful aspect of deployment is the reintegration of the previously deployed parent (DOD, 2010; Flake et al., 2009; Huebner & Mancini, 2005). There are several issues that may contribute to the stress of the at-home parent and children, such as concerns about recognizing the absent parent, re-establishment of roles and responsibilities, and the lack of recognition from the deployed parent in changes in the children (Huebner
& Mancini, 2005). This period of reintegration may be even more stressful for OIF/OEF military families as the majority of service men and women are serving multiple terms and must therefore prepare themselves to depart soon after they return (APA, 2007). Another unique aspect of this era is the increase in men and women that return home with severe injuries (DOD, 2010). In the four-year period between 2003 and 2007, it was reported that over 70,000 returned soldiers were diagnosed with a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), or both (Fischer, 2009). Over 40,000 children have had a deployed parent return home with an injury, wound, or illness (DOD, 2010). Children of a parent returning with PTSD may experience withdrawal, depression, anxiety, or somatic symptoms (DOD, 2010).

As outlined in the previous research and literature, military deployment may cause similar stressors on the at-home parent and child that have been found to contribute to parentification in other familial situations. Children must take on new roles and responsibilities that they may or may not be ready for while dealing with the stress of knowing a parent is in a very high-risk setting. In a review of previous studies on the impact of deployment to Afghanistan or Iraq on military children, it was found that military spouses and children experienced more emotional and behavioral difficulties and increased stress when compared to samples of children from non-deployed parents (White, de Burgh, Fear, & Iversen, 2011). Parental stress combined with unique deployment factors associated with OIF and OEF may lead at-home parents to turn to their child(ren) for emotional and physical support. Therefore, we hypothesized that children from one-parent military families due to deployment will report greater rates of parentification than those from two-parent military families. It is important to investigate the presence of parentification within these military families as OIF and OEF are winding down and deployed service men and women are returning home to their families. Any negative effects deployment may have on at-home children must be addressed and identified in order to assist clinicians on what type of support to provide to military children and families and to prevent potential negative outcomes for future generations.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

The participants in this study were recruited through a larger grant-funded study. The sample in this study consisted of 22 children ages 7-17 (see Figure 1). Additional demographics, such as race and gender, were also collected, although one participant chose not to disclose race. These children were from two groups, intact military families and one-parent military families due to deployment. Intact military families were defined as no parent deployed within the past ninety days or more, and one-parent military families were defined as at least 30 days of parental deployment and the deployed parent must still be absent (Pincus et al., 2005). Of the two groups, 7 children were from military families with a deployed parent, and 15 children were from military families without a deployed parent. Exclusion criteria are those that are part of the larger grant funded study on the overall effects of deployment on the at-home family, and include children:

(a) Who are psychotic, reporting suicidal ideation, or suffering from intellectual deficits or autism,

(b) Whose family is currently experiencing a major life stressor other than parental separation

(c) With an IQ that falls below 80 as assessed by the Block Design and Vocabulary subtests of the WISC-IV, and

(d) Who use any medications known to impact cortisol levels such as corticosteroids, due to cortisol collection in larger grant funded study.

As this study was conducted as a part of a larger project, these exclusion criteria were applied as they are being implemented in the larger study and may serve as confounding variables.

**Measure**

The assessment tool utilized in this study was the Parentification Questionnaire – Youth (Godsall & Jurkovic, 1995). The PQ-Y was modified from the original Parentification Questionnaire, which is a retrospective survey given to adults to measure rates of
past parentification. In a study conducted by Godsall et al. (2004) measuring parentification rates of children of alcoholics, the Parentification Questionnaire was shortened from 42 questions to 20 questions, vocabulary level was lowered, and verb tense was changed to present tense in order to measure current parentification rates in children and adolescents. Moderate internal consistency was established at alpha = .75. Construct validity was established with a sample of heterogeneous adolescents from alcoholic parents and non-alcoholic parents (Godsall et al., 2004). The PQ-Y is a 20-item self-report survey that measures the degree of emotional and instrumental parentification as experienced by the child. Each item is a yes or no statement worth up to 1 point, so the parentification score may range from 0–20. Higher scores indicate a greater degree of parentification. It is geared toward a third grade reading level and is therefore a feasible measure for the participants in this study. For children who had any trouble reading the measure, a clinician was available to either read it to them in person or over the phone.

Procedure

The PQ-Y was included as a self-report measure in the assessment created for the larger military families’ study that should take at most ten minutes to complete. Children were instructed to read each statement, apply it to their own family situation, and answer by circling yes or no, as to whether the given statement was applicable to them. The measure was then given to the clinician or mailed to the military families’ project office, which is located at the University of Central Florida in the Psychology Clinic.

Data Analysis

An independent samples t-test was conducted using 20 of the 22 participants. Two cases were excluded from the military family group without a deployed parent in order to control for error as they deviated significantly from the median score. A box plot was used to identify these outliers (see Figure 2). Outliers may negatively affect results as they may lead to either a Type I or Type II error and results that will only generalize to a population with the same outliers, which is highly unlikely to occur. In addition, box plots have been highlighted as a simple way to identify such outliers as “univariate outliers are visible in these plots as points that lie a considerable distance from others” (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013, p. 74). As can be seen in Figure 1, the upper bar in family group 2 (military family without a deployed parent) extends significantly further from the cluster of scores than the bar in family group 1 (military families with a deployed parent) does. This outlier score on the PQ-Y is identified as a number 2 in the box plot. An extreme outlier in family group 2 is noted above the box plot as a data point with a 1 next to it. These two cases were removed to control for error.

RESULTS

After conducting an independent-samples t-test, a significant difference was found in parentification between military families with a deployed parent and military families without a deployed parent (t(18) = 2.33, p < .05, two-tailed). Military families with a deployed parent (M = 7.28, SD = 3.498) had a higher mean score of parentification than intact military families (M = 4.31, SD = 2.25). Additional analyses were conducted to test the function of demographics on the PQ-Y and no significant effects were found for race, including Caucasian, African American, and Latino (F(2, 18) = .158, p = .232), age group, defined as 7–9 years, 10–12 years, and 13–17 years (F(2, 18) = .555, p = .584), or gender (t(20) = .161, p = .87, two-tailed). Given the small sample size in this study, an individual item analysis could not be conducted to look at specific areas of parentification that differed between the groups. However, after reviewing the data, it was identified that question 9, “I’m told I act older than my age,” had the greatest endorsement by the children in the deployed parent group.

DISCUSSION

As hypothesized, there was a significant difference in rates of parentification between military families with a deployed parent and military families without a deployed parent. Children in military families with a deployed parent have higher rates of parentification. Therefore, the results of this study suggest that military families with a deployed parent may be parentifying their child (or children) (i.e. giving excessive roles and responsibilities). Our results are consistent with current research on military families that has addressed similar issues. Much of the existing research on the effects of deployment on the at-home family has identified the presence of role-reversal, boundary dissolution, and extra roles and responsibilities for the children (DOD, 2010; Easterbrooks et al., 2013; Flake et al., 2009; Huebner & Mancini, 2005; Huebner et al., 2007; Paley et al., 2013; White et al., 2011). As the presence of greater rates of
parentification has been identified in military families with a deployed parent versus military families without a deployed parent, future research should investigate the positive or negative effects, if any, parentification has on military children.

It may be of interest that parentification rates found in this study were lower than those found in studies of children from divorced parents and alcoholic parents. This may be due to support groups, such as Family Readiness Groups, and other resources available to military families upon deployment (APA, 2007; DOD, 2010; Easterbrooks et al., 2013; Flake et al., 2009). There are approximately 300 support programs worldwide that address life challenges and promote readiness for military families preparing for a deployment (DOD, 2010). In research on military families with a deployed parent, Flake et al. (2009) identified that the majority of at-home parents felt supported by the military. Military and community support groups have been associated with lower levels of parental stress and better psychosocial outcomes in children (White et al., 2011). An additional factor that may be associated with the lower levels of parenification found with military children is the element of pride associated with being in a military family and fighting for American interests (Wexler, 1991).

Interestingly, the most commonly endorsed item on the PQ-Y by both groups was “I’m told that I act older than my age.” This may suggest that military children are more resilient than others and have experienced positive growth from any extra roles and responsibilities. Further research is needed to assess the relationship between parenification and resiliency in military children. However, an additional component to consider when looking at parenification in military families is to what branch of the armed forces the military spouse(s) belongs. In the current era, there has been an unprecedented reliance on National Guard and Reserve troops, many of which are men and women with families. These families often do not identify as military families, and may not have as much access to support groups (APA, 2007; DOD, 2010; Huebner & Mancini, 2005).

A few limitations of this study should be considered when interpreting the results. Due to time constraints, this study assessed parenification in a very small sample of military children (N=20). The small sample size of this study gives the results less generalizability when applying them to a population of military children. However, a small sample size was taken into consideration when completing the data analysis, and any outliers that may have negatively affected the results were removed. Future research should include a larger sample of children from military families with a deployed parent and military families without a deployed parent, controlling for whether the service member was in the Reserve or National Guard.

An additional limitation is the fact that military families were not compared to non-military families. The results obtained may be attributed to another component of military families with a deployed parent that influenced the answers on the PQ-Y, and not just the deployment variable itself. Including non-military families (intact or separated) may control for the influence of other familial factors in military families. Future research should assess parenification rates in military families with a deployed parent, intact military families, divorced civilian families or civilian families with parental alcoholism, civilian families separated by work (non-military related), and intact civilian families. Including these control groups may further isolate the influence of deployment on parenification. Another important variable to consider when researching parenification within military families is any changes in parenification pre-deployment versus post-deployment, as this factor would further isolate deployment as a causative factor for parenification.

When conducting future research with parenification and military families, it is important to assess the relationship between parenification rates and academic success, behavior problems, socio-emotional functioning, and other potential psychosocial outcomes. Post-war adolescents in Bosnia, for example, were found to have lower academic grades and behavior problems when extra roles and responsibilities were perceived as unfair (Jurkovic et al., 2005). Other research has highlighted the negative effect perceived unfairness may have on the mental health of the child (Hooper & Wallace, 2010; Jankowski et al., 2013). Therefore, future work should add a measure of perceived unfairness when assessing academic success, emotional stability or other issues in relation to parenification with military families.

In addition to perceived unfairness, it may be important to assess demographic characteristics in relation to parenification, such as gender, age, and ethnicity. Although this study did not find significant effects for any demographics, this likely resulted from the small sample size and lack of variance. Previous research has found that girls may be at greater risk for parenification than boys.
(Peris et al., 2008). However, in a past study that assessed parentification in relation to age (Godsall et al., 2004), no significant results were obtained, suggesting that age may not play a large role in determining parentification outcomes. Interestingly, Jurkovic and colleagues (2008, 2013) found varying effects of perceived unfairness in relation to caregiving with immigrant Latino adolescents and post-war Bosnian adolescents. With Bosnian adolescents, caregiving and unfairness independently contributed to the variance in social functioning and only unfairness related to increased self-reports of distress. However, with immigrant Latino adolescents, caregiving only affected social functioning when paired with greater levels of perceived unfairness (Jurkovic et al., 2008; Kuperminc et al., 2013). Therefore, culture is an important factor to take into consideration when looking at what roles and responsibilities adolescents deem unfair. This is particularly important with military children as these children come from a unique military culture and may view the family structure differently than children not raised in the military.

The results of this study indicate that parentification may be present in military families following the deployment of a parent. Although the limitations of this study, such as small sample size and inadequate control groups, prevent concluding with complete certainty that parentification exists in military families due to deployment, this area of research is worth pursuing. If higher rates of parentification in deployed military families are found in well-designed and more controlled studies, it may be particularly important to further investigate whether higher rates of parentification of children in military families with a deployed parent are associated with increased resilience or higher levels of distress and dysfunction in conjunction with perceived unfairness.
APPENDIX

Figure 1. Graph of Age Distribution of Children

Figure 2. Box Plot of Parentification Questionnaire — Youth Outliers

Parentification within Military Family Groups

Family Group 1 = military families with a deployed parent
Family Group 2 = military families without a deployed parent

1 = Outlier in data
2 = Outlier in data
REFERENCES


