

Military-Related Stressors & Psychological Vulnerability: The Role of Marital Warmth



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Introduction

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq impacted not only global relations, but also intimate family relations. In the 10 years following 9/11, an estimated 1 million US active duty (AD) service members were deployed to combat zones, many with multiple deployments. During deployment family members, particularly spouses, are required to shoulder familial responsibilities including childcare, often independently, as well as manage other stressors that accompany military life, including relocation and susceptibility to secondary traumatization.

Based on previous research, we know that chronic life strains (e.g., responsibilities that accompany military service) tend to erode self-efficacy leaving individuals more vulnerable to the effects of stress.

The stress process theory posits that intimate sources of support, such as marital/couple interactions, may serve as a resource to aid individuals facing stress.

This study sought to examine (1) how military-related stressors influence the mental health of AD service members and their partners using the stress process perspective and (2) determine *if* and *how* marital warmth impacts stress and the stress process.

Perspective 1: Marital warmth will moderate the relationships between military stress, self-efficacy, and psychological vulnerability, such that the relationships between the variables will differ for those reporting high marital warmth and those reporting low warmth.

Perspective 2: Marital warmth will be associated with the level of stress, self-efficacy, and psychological vulnerability experienced by AD service members and spouses. In other words, the value or starting point for each component of the stress process will differ based on reports of marital warmth.

Method

234 couples (AD service member & his/her spouse) participated. They were married an average of 12.59 years.

Measures: military stress, self-efficacy, mental health, and marital warmth.

To test perspective 1, a mediated structural equation model was fitted.

To test perspective 2, a multivariate ANOVA was conducted.

Results

Perspective 1. As hypothesized by the stress process perspective, military stress was related to psychological vulnerability for both partners and self-efficacy posed an indirect effect on this relationship. One cross partner effect was found; the AD partner's self-efficacy was inversely related to the psychological vulnerability of his/her partner. Yet, there were no differences in model fit for couples reporting high marital warmth compared to those reporting low marital warmth. Little evidence was found for this perspective on the role of marital warmth.

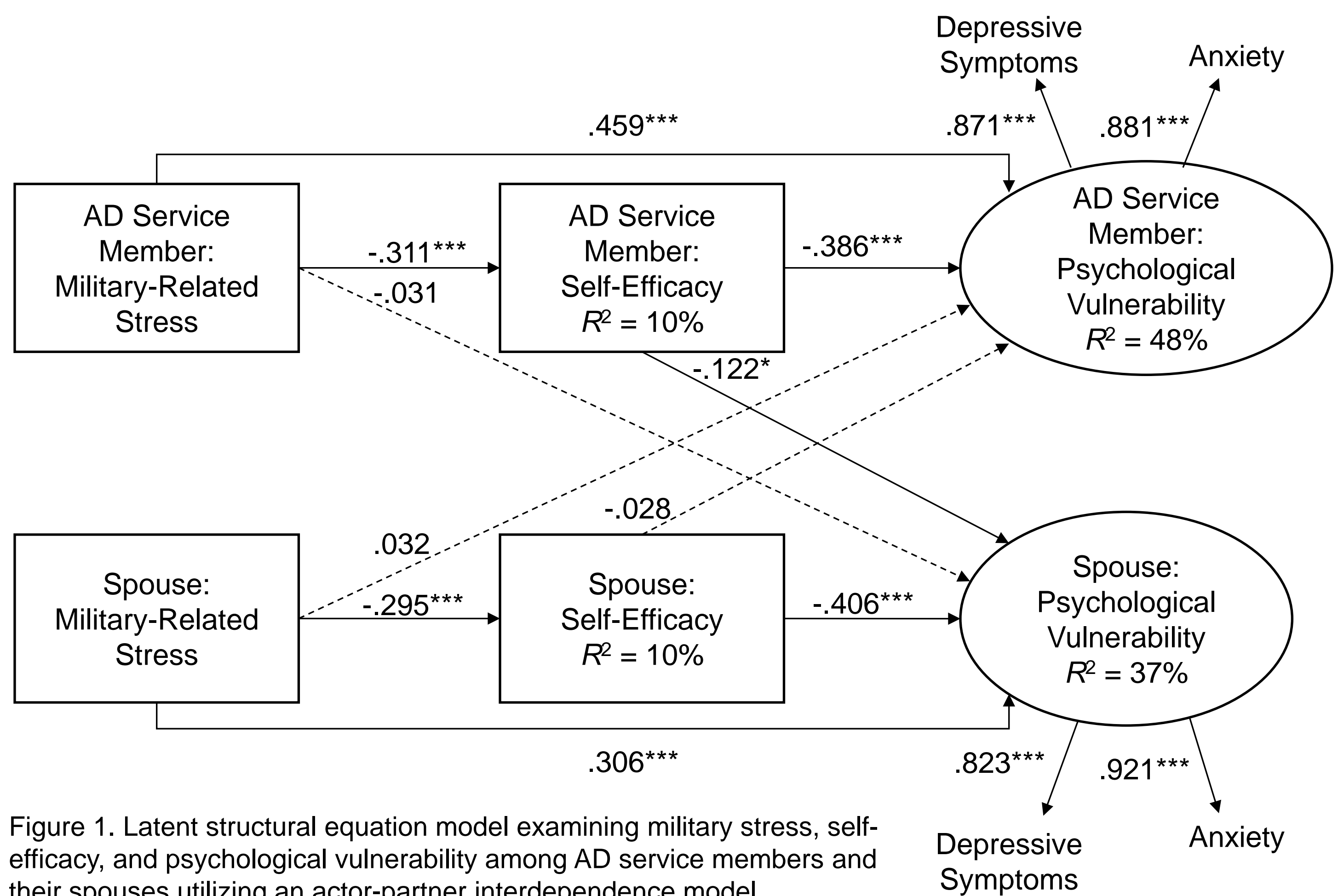


Figure 1. Latent structural equation model examining military stress, self-efficacy, and psychological vulnerability among AD service members and their spouses utilizing an actor-partner interdependence model.

Perspective 2. Results of the multivariate ANOVA (see Table 1) suggest that those with high levels of marital warmth overall reported lower military stress, higher self-efficacy, lower depressive symptoms, and lower anxiety.

Discussion

Findings suggest that the family, particularly one's marriage or romantic relationship, matters for how stress is experienced. While all couples experienced a link between high levels of stress and poorer outcomes (self-efficacy and mental health), couples in warm relationships tended to report better functioning. Investing in one's romantic relationship may have significant impacts on mental health, particularly in the context of stress.

Table 1. Multivariate ANOVA exploring differences between individuals reporting high versus low marital warmth. Analyses were run separately for AD service members and their spouses.

	High Marital Warmth		Low Marital Warmth		Sig.
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
AD Service Member: Overall					.003**
Military Stress	1.82	.82	2.24	.96	.006**
Self-efficacy	2.73	.27	2.59	.34	.029*
Depressive Symptoms	1.45	.42	1.66	.50	.006**
Anxiety	1.42	.29	1.57	.30	.004**
Spouse: Overall					.000***
Military Stress	1.75	.70	2.33	.89	.000***
Self-efficacy	2.66	.35	2.46	.41	.011*
Depressive Symptoms	1.47	.42	1.78	.49	.000***
Anxiety	1.40	.28	1.57	.31	.002**