



## Psychological Adjustment among Military Personnel: Exploring Coping Styles, Officer Cadres and Gender

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigated the roles of coping styles, officer cadres and gender on psychological adjustment among military personnel in Nigeria. Cross-sectional survey design was adopted while purposive sampling technique was used to select one military cantonment in Nigeria. Data were collected from 202 military personnel using validated scales and analyze using multiple regression analysis and independent samples t-test. Three hypotheses were tested and accepted at  $p = .000$ . The result revealed that coping styles and officer cadres jointly predicted psychological adjustment among military personnel [ $R^2 = .40$ ,  $F(2, 199) = 65.34$ ,  $p = .000$ ]. Also, the result indicated that emotion-focused and problem-focused dimensions of coping styles jointly predicted psychological adjustment among study participants [ $R^2 = .50$ ,  $F(2, 199) = 100.73$ ,  $p = .000$ ]. Furthermore, emotion-focused dimension of coping styles ( $\beta = .66$ ,  $t = 10.73$ ,  $p = .000$ ) independently predicted psychological adjustment among study participants. The study concludes that coping styles rather than the officer cadres is a robust predictor of psychological adjustment among military personnel in Nigeria. The study recommended that adequate welfare package should be implemented by the military authority to help their officers to cope effectively in order to manage their psychological well-being.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Psychological adjustment refers to an individual's self-efficacy to cope with emotions, stress and maintain psychological well-being while facing challenges (Gambhir & Bhatt, 2024). It indicates an ever-changing process of adapting and learning how to create a balance between those intrinsic and extrinsic demands of life. Cruz (2020) conceives psychological adjustment problems as that reflecting an individual's subjective emotional distress and the effects of emotional distress in daily life. Psychological adjustment within the work environment encompasses the individual's psychological well-being with various aspects of work (Takeuchi et al., 2007). When views from the lenses of military personnel, psychological adjustment of a new recruit (junior officer) compared to a sergeant or a major (senior officer), what is seen would be an individual thinking whether he/she would be able to go through the rigors of being a soldier in comparison with individual who is ready to face anything that comes his/her way including death (Visagie, 2013). Some factors have been investigated to predict psychological adjustment among military personnel.

One factor considered in this study as a likely predictor of psychological adjustment among military personnel is coping style. Coping style refers to an individual 'personal cognitive or behavioural strategy to master, reduce or tolerate a stressful situation' (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). Two types of coping styles have been identified: Emotion- focused coping style which deals with managing the emotions arising from exposure to the stressful situation, and problem-focused coping style which has to do with managing or altering the problem causing the distress (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984). Furthermore, Miller (1987) identified two concepts of information seeking behaviour in which an individual coping style is expressed as 'monitoring' and 'blunting'. Monitoring information seeking behaviour is the extent to which an individual has an attention bias for negative, potentially painful or dangerous aspects of information (Miller, 1987). Also, it is an adaptive strategy when individuals perceive themselves as having control to solve problem such as changing certain health behaviour (Fakorede, 2018). On the other hand, blunting information seeking behavior involves the extent to which an individual distracts "self" from the threatening information (Miller, 1987). Situating coping style in this study, military service revolves around coping because of the nature of the situations they face every day.

Therefore, the inability to cope is an invitation to anarchy or even death among military personnel. Areas of coping among military personnel include the rigorous drillings they undergo every time, hunger and starvation, thirst, unending exercises, assaults, maltreatments, denials, sicknesses and even death (Fakorede, 2018). Compared to non-military personnel, coping styles among the military personnel include the willingness to pay the ultimate price. Staring death in the face or even actual death by a soldier signifies one who is a well-adjusted individual in the military. Studies that have investigated coping style as predictor of psychological adjustment gave varied results. Therefore, this study hypothesizes that coping style would predict psychological adjustment among military personnel. Also, the study hypothesizes that emotion-focused

and problem-focused dimension of coping styles would jointly and independently predict psychological adjustment among military personnel in Nigeria.

The second factor considered in this study as a likely predictor of psychological adjustment among military personnel is the officer cadre (rank, professional status) in which the officer is or has acquired. The personnel could be a new recruit, junior officer or established officer, or senior officer (Fakorede, 2018). Military personnel cadre/rank could be determined by years of experience, age, gender, level of education, the number of combat experiences could predict psychological adjustment of such military personnel. For example, officers who have been in the military for 15 years, have entered the service as a degree holder, attended several courses both locally and internationally, have combat experiences, and in the course of service have been promoted to one or more ranks would be better in psychologically adjustment than a new recruit, with no military experiences, and no rank. Studies linking officer cadre (or rank) of the military personnel to the level of their psychological adjustment is scarce, therefore, this study hypothesize that cadre (rank) would independently predict psychological adjustment among military personnel in Nigeria.

The final factor considered is gender, that is, whether the military personnel is a male or a female. While people see the military as a job meant for males, females are also involved, and they are in large numbers. When the military personnel engage in combat or in peace operations, female soldiers are given the opportunity to perform many military operations which could affect their psychological adjustments (Fakorede, 2018). Therefore, a well-adjusted female officer would be given tasks in preference to the male soldier officer who are not well adjusted. Studies on psychological adjustment among military personnel (males or females) tend to give varied results. While some studies have reported gender difference to influence psychological adjustment (Visagie, 2013) other studies have found no gender differences among military personnel (Fakorede, 2018). Therefore, this study tested the hypothesis that gender would significantly influence psychological adjustment among military personnel in Nigeria.

Studies investigating predictors of psychological adjustment have produced varied results. Also, studies linking coping style, officer cadre and gender on psychological adjustment among military personnel in Nigeria are lacking, thus leaving a gap in knowledge to be filled. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate coping style, officer cadre and gender as predictors of psychological adjustment among military personnel in Nigeria. The research questions raised to guide this study were: Would coping style and officer cadre jointly and independently predict psychological adjustment among military personnel in Nigeria? Would emotion-focused and problem-focused coping styles jointly and independently predict psychological adjustment among military personnel in Nigerian? And would female military personnel report higher psychological adjustment than their male counterparts?

The study would bring new insight into the influence of coping styles and professional status on the psychological adjustment among military personnel in Nigeria. Also, military authority in charge of personnel development and deployment would find this study relevance to profiling their officers for combat readiness. Finally, the study would provide new data for further study on coping styles and psychological adjustment among military personnel.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

This study is anchored on Lazarus and Folkman (1984) appraisal theory which stated that a specific event or stressor influences individual cognitions of an event. The theory examines the process by which emotions are elicited as a result of an individual's subjective interpretation or evaluation of important events or situations in an individual's life (Lazarus, 1999). Appraisal theory is decomposed into two parts: Primary appraisal and secondary appraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Primary appraisal is the individual's evaluation of an event or situation as a potential hazard to individual's well-being. Also, it is when an individual concentrates on the magnitude of an event or situation possibly for the likely harm it would cause (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). On the other hand, secondary appraisal has to do with how individuals evaluate his or her ability to handle event or situation. Based on the primary and secondary appraisals, an individual would develop coping styles. Lazarus (1999) identified two types of coping styles: Problem-focused coping which allows individual to focus attention on situation-specific goals. The second one is emotion-focused coping which involves positive reappraisal which is needed to assist in coping (Lazarus, 1999).

When applied in this study, military duties and assignment are associated with initial shock and stress which robs the military personnel the ability to assess the situation. The shock is closely followed by the evaluation of the stressor, and then the assessment of whether or not the military personnel would be able to overcome the adverse condition caused by the situation the military personnel found one' self in. This evaluation is very important because it determines whether the soldier would be able to overcome the situation and adapt or not. This evaluation that leads decision would provide the military personnel with the reason to either engage in psychological adjustment or remain psychologically maladjusted.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Design**

The study adopted a cross-sectional research design while data were collected using validated questionnaires. The independent variables were cadre, gender and coping style while the dependent variable was psychological adjustment. The study was conducted among military personnel in Abuja cantonment, the Nigerian Federal Capital City.

### **Sampling Technique**

Purposive sampling technique was used to select Abuja military cantonment while convenience sampling technique was used to administer the questionnaires to the potential participants.

### **Participants**

Descriptive analysis revealed that 137 (68%) were males while 65 (32%) were females. The participant's age was between 29 and 55 years with average age of 30.20 (SD = 8.72). The marital status indicated that 120 (59%) of the participants were married, 74 (37%) were singles while 8 (4%) were divorced. In terms of educational qualifications, 92 (45%) of the participants were HND/BSc holders, 74 (37%) were ND/NCE holders, 29 (14%) were Masters holders, while 7 (4%) had other qualifications. The ethnic groups showed that more of the participants 96 (47%) were Hausa, 47 (23%) were from other ethnic groups, 36 (18%) were Yoruba, while 23 (11%) were Igbo. As regards religion affiliations, 111 (55%) were Christians, 81 (40.1%) were Muslims, while 10 (5%) indicated to be traditionalists. Finally, in terms of the officer cadres, 99 (49%) were junior cadre officers, while 103 (51%) were senior cadre officers

### **Instruments**

Work and Social Adjustment Scale (WSAS, Mundt et al., 2002) was used to measure psychological adjustment among participants. It is a 5-item scale presented on an 8-point Likert's format with responses of: Not at all; Very Slightly; Slightly; Definitely; Markedly; Very Markedly; Severely; and very severely. Sample items include: "Because of my [problem] my ability to work is impaired" and "Because of my [problem] my social leisure activities (with other people e.g. parties, bars, clubs, outings, visits, dating, home entertaining)". Authors obtained Cronbach's alpha measure ranges from 0.70 to 0.94 and in this study, Cronbach's alpha that ranges from 0.69 to 0.86 was obtained.

Coping Strategies Inventory Short-Form (CSI-SF, Addison et al., 2024) was used to measure coping style which is a 16-item self-report questionnaire rated on a 5-point Likert's format from 1 = Never, 2 = Seldom, 3 = Sometimes, 4 = Often and 5 = Almost Always. Sample items include: "I make a plan of action and follow it" and "I look for the silver lining or try to look on the bright side of things". The CSI-SF has four 4-item subscales: (a) Problem-Focused Engagement, (b) Problem-Focused Disengagement, (c) Emotion-Focused Engagement, and (d) Emotion-Focused Disengagement. Authors obtained Cronbach's alpha for each subscale as Problem-Focused Engagement ( $\alpha = 0.59$ ) Problem-Focused Disengagement ( $\alpha = 0.69$ ), Emotion-Focused Engagement ( $\alpha = 0.72$ ) and Emotion-Focused Disengagement ( $\alpha = 0.70$ ). And for this study, Cronbach's alphas for each subscale were Problem-Focused engagement ( $\alpha = 0.59$ ), Problem-Focused Disengagement ( $\alpha = 0.68$ ), Emotion-Focused Engagement ( $\alpha = 0.70$ ), and Emotion-Focused Disengagement ( $\alpha = 0.71$ ).

### **Procedure**

Formal letter of introduction was obtained from the Department of Psychology, University of Ibadan which was presented to the commandant Nigeria Army, Abuja Cantonment. After vetting the questionnaires, verbal approval was granted. Potential participants were met in their parade grounds,

cantonment soldier clubs, duty post, mess halls, medical centre and chaplain centres. They were briefed of the study and asked to participate in the study. Potential participants were duly informed that participation was voluntary and assured that responses would be treated confidentially. Potential participants who agreed to participate in the study were given the questionnaires to fill and collected on the spot. However, few participants collected and were to pick it up later. A total of 210 questionnaires were distributed while 207 were retrieved (that is, 98% response rate). During screening and coding, five questionnaires were half-filled and were discarded thus left with 202 used for the final analysis.

**Data Analysis**

IBM SPSS version 23 was used to analyse data collected. Both descriptive and inferential statistics was computed. Hypothesis one was tested using multiple regression while hypothesis two was tested using independent samples t-test. All hypotheses were accepted at  $p = 0.000$  level of significance.

**RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

**H1:** Coping styles and professional status/rank/cadre would jointly and independently predict psychological adjustment among military personnel. This was tested using multiple regression analysis and the result is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Multiple Regression Analysis Showing Coping Styles and Professional Status/Rank/Cadre as Predictors of Psychological Adjustment

Criterion	Predictors	$\beta$	t	p	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F	p
	Cadre	-.03	-.45	>.05				
Psychological adjustment					.63	.40	65.34	.000*
	Coping styles	.63	11.43	.000				

\* Significant at  $p = .000$  level of significant

Table 1 presents result of the joint and independent predictors of coping styles and professional status/ rank/cadre on psychological adjustment among military personnel. The result revealed that coping styles and professional status/rank/cadre jointly predicted psychological adjustment among military personnel [ $R^2 = .40$ ,  $F(2, 199) = 65.34$ ,  $p = .000$ ]. Collectively, coping styles and cadre accounted for about 40% variance in psychological adjustment. Also, the result indicated that coping styles ( $\beta = .63$ ,  $t = 11.43$ ,  $p = .000$ ) independently predicted psychological adjustment. However, cadre did not independently predict psychological adjustment ( $\beta = -.03$ ,  $t = -.45$ ,  $p > .05$ ). Therefore, the hypothesis was partially supported.

**H2:** Emotion-focused and problem-focused coping styles would jointly and independently predict psychological adjustment among military personnel. The hypothesis was tested using multiple regression analysis and the result is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Multiple Regression Analysis of Coping Styles Dimensions as Predictors of Psychological Adjustment among Military Personnel

Criterion	Predictors	$\beta$	t	p	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F	p
	Emotion-focused	.66	10.73	=.000				
Psychological adjustment					.71	.50	100.73	.000*
	Problem-focused	.07	1.20	>.05				

\* Significant at  $p = .000$  level of significant

Table 2 presents result of the joint and independent predictors of coping style dimensions of emotion-focused and problem-focused on psychological adjustment among military personnel. The result showed that coping style dimensions of emotion-focused and problem focused jointly predicted psychological adjustment among military personnel [ $R^2 = .50$ ,  $F(2, 199) = 100.73$ ,  $p = .000$ ]. Collectively, coping style dimensions of emotion-focused and problem-focused accounted for about 50% variance in psychological adjustment. Furthermore, the result revealed that emotion-focused coping style ( $\beta = .66$ ,  $t = 10.73$ ,  $p = .000$ ) independently predicted psychological adjustment. However, problem-focused coping style did not independently predict psychological adjustment among study participants ( $\beta = .07$ ,  $t = 1.20$ ,  $p > .05$ ). The hypothesis was partially supported.

**H3:** Gender would significantly influence psychological adjustment among military personnel. The hypothesis was tested using independent samples t-test and the result is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Independent Sample T-test Showing the Influence of Gender on Psychological Adjustment among Military Personnel

Dependent variable	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p
	Male	137	17.88	5.55			
Psychological adjustment					.76	200	>.05
	Female	109	17.23	5.79			

Table 3 presents the results of the influence of gender on psychological adjustment among military personnel. The result showed that gender had no significant influence on psychological -adjustment among military personnel [ $t(202) = .76$ ,  $p > .05$ ]. The hypothesis was rejected.

The hypothesis that coping styles and cadre would jointly and independently predict psychological adjustment among military personnel was partially supported. It is shown that coping styles and cadre jointly predicted psychological adjustment among military personnel. This implies that the ability to adjust psychologically as military personnel depends on the interaction between individual coping styles and the cadre an individual is in the military which explained 40% of the variance in psychological adjustment. However, only coping styles independently predicted psychological adjustment. This finding means that military personnel who are in senior positions in the military with good coping styles would demonstrate robust

psychological adjustments compared to officers in low cadre and poor coping styles. This finding lent credence to result obtained by Fakorede et al. (2024) that coping styles and higher hierarchy boost psychological well-being among combat officers.

The second hypothesis that emotion-focused and problem-focused coping styles would jointly and independently predict psychological adjustment among military personnel was supported. It is revealed that emotion-focused and problem-focused dimensions of coping styles jointly predicted psychological adjustment among military personnel. Together, coping styles dimensions (emotion-focused and problem-focused) accounted for 50% variance in psychological adjustment. Also, emotion-focused coping styles independently predicted psychological adjustment among study participants. This finding implies that individuals who are emotionally adjusted and have the capacity to solve problems would be more psychologically adjusted compared to individuals' deficits in these coping styles. This finding corroborated previous results that coping styles were significant predictors of individuals' psychological well-being across different populations including that of military personnel (Fakorede, 2018; Fakorede et al., 2024).

The third hypothesis that gender difference would exist between male and female military personnel was not supported. This means that whether the individual is a male or female do not make a difference when it comes to psychological adjustment among military personnel (Fakorede, 2018). This finding supported light dale and Prentice (1994) de-individuation theory that an individual whether men or female would lose their individual identity and become anonymous in crowds or mobs. In a simple term, gender differences in psychological adjustment depends on the context in which adjustment behaviour is displayed, not necessary whether the person is a male or female.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

This study has empirically established that coping styles and cadre interact to predict psychological adjustment among military personnel. Also, emotional-focused and problem-focused dimensions of coping styles jointly predicted psychological adjustment among study participants. However, gender did not influence psychological adjustment among military personnel.

Based on the findings in this study, the following recommendations are suggested: Military personnel should be educated on how to use coping styles to improve their psychological well-being. Also, military authority should put in place robust welfare plans that include good pay, health insurance, regular promotion, functional pension and insurance policies for the military personnel. Finally, since psychological adjustment and maladjustment are multi-faceted challenges that need multidisciplinary approach, therefore, while managing military personnel identified with these problems, doctors, nursing, social workers, dieticians, occupational therapists and more importantly, clinical psychologist should be co-opted to help military personnel sufferings from adjustment and maladjustment challenges.

## FURTHER STUDY

Some limitations in this study were identified. First, the study was a cross-sectional survey employing validated questionnaires for data collection which was not free of response bias. Further study would benefit with the use of key informant discussion and documentary evidence from case files for those who have been identified with psychological maladjustment issues to triangulate data obtained from questionnaire only method. Furthermore, sample size of 202 and selection of only one military cantonment hindered generalization of results obtained. Therefore, further study should increase sample size and number of military cantonments selected. Finally, the independent variables studied were not exhaustive, further study should include personality traits, self-esteem, social support, learned helplessness, etc.

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