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Coping with the absence of parents: growing up in military families in Slovenia

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ABSTRACT

Growing up in a military family with long-term and frequently absent parents presents unique psychosocial challenges to children and families. The purpose of this paper is to examine what growing up in a military family with absent parents looks like from a child's perspective, what the biggest challenges are, and how children cope with them. We took a life course approach and conducted retrospective, semi-structured in-depth interviews with 13 adult children from 11 military families in Slovenia, which revealed that prolonged parental absences leave a strong impression on children's individual biographies and everyday life. This influence is evident in their present and past everyday life throughout their life trajectories. It particularly affects relationships with parents and relationships between parents, leads to frequent changes in daily routines and disrupts the family balance as well as causes anxiety and fear for the parent. From the children's perspective, it also affects their parents' parenting practices (how their parents raised them) and how they manage their lives.

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Absence; parental deployment; military family; life course; everyday life; growing-up

Introduction

Growing up and living in a military family, where periods of absence of one or both parents are frequent, presents a unique situation with many everyday and psychosocial challenges for children as well as parents. Focusing on perception of adult children who grew up in military families, this paper explores what growing up in a military family with absent parent(s) looks like from a child's perspective, what the biggest challenges are, and what strategies children use to overcome them.

Although the notion of military family might seem obvious at a first glance is, its definition is not as simple as both involved institutions (i.e. military and family) are socially constructed and therefore structurally and inherently dependent on historical and social time and place. For the purposes of this article, the adjective 'military' refers to a family in which one or both parents are employed by the Slovenian Armed

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Forces (SAF) and refers to a peacetime period (without war) in which SAF service members are deployed to international operations and missions abroad. This is an important distinction, as we do not examine growing up in families living in war zones or in families where parents are deployed in combat missions in war elsewhere in the world. In terms of the definition of the 'family' we also acknowledge its dependence on socio-historical time and place and consider social changes in family life over the past fifty years in Western societies (Chambers, 2012; Cheal, 2022; Švab, 2001), including pluralization of family forms, changes in division of family labour as well as changes in family roles (such as phenomenon of active fatherhood and protective childhood). Although young adults in our sample come from two-parent nuclear families, it is important to take into account, that military families do no live in isolation from the outside world and are as such subject to social change as well (Kasearu et al., 2020; Moelker et al., 2019).

However, as previous research has shown, both in USA as in Slovenia, military families differ from other families in specific way, where employment of one or both spouses in military organization importantly influences life of all family members, especially children and it also influences experiences and perceptions of living in a military family (e.g. Blaisure et al., 2016; Moelker et al., 2019; Segal, 1986; Vuga & Juvan, 2013; Vuga Beršnak et al., 2023). Among others, 'military life confronts service members and their families with severe demands, including long hours, unpredictable schedules, frequent relocations, and separations from loved ones due to deployment' (Segal, in Karney et al., 2012, p. 1574), which also means that 'the military is a more rigid and demanding institution compared with most civilian work contexts, and therefore military employment might be expected to lead to greater work–family conflict, particularly for dual-military couples where both spouses are serving' (Woodall et al., 2020, p. 2047). Furthermore, while family life has been subject to multiple societal changes and has undergone significant transformation, military organization has remained 'fairly traditional' (Raid et al., 2019, p. 87), which may lead to more turbulence and adaptation processes in military families. One such example is the portrayal of family and military as two greedy institutions, both placing high and often competing or conflicting demands on military personnel (Coser, 1974; Segal, 1986), which has been confirmed also in SAF (Vuga & Juvan, 2013).

In this paper we focus specifically on those families in which one or both parents employed in the SAF and were also absent from the family at least once for an extended period of time (at least 6 months) due to the demands of work (i.e. to international deployments and missions (IOM) or to extended training at home or abroad) during the respondent's childhood or/and the entire family moved to a specific post abroad during childhood. Military absences also differ from other prolonged absences of parents due to work in other professions (such as science or diplomacy) in that they are associated with a high risk to life, even though IOM in Slovenia are not combat-oriented but are nevertheless always located in conflict or war zones. Therefore, the fear for the health and life of the parents is present in the spouses and in the slightly older children, who understand the purpose of the military and the possible loss of life in service.

To better understand the specific risks for children growing up in military families with frequent deployments and to gain a deeper understanding of the influence of

such deployments on the children's life course, this article uses qualitative methods to examine the children's own lived experiences of their childhood in military families and the outcomes in their later life. The article is structured into the following chapters. First, we present the theoretical background of the study, where we discuss the life course framework and everyday life in the context of deployment and military family life. We proceed with the presentation of the research, including the perspective, research questions and thematic orientation, followed by the description of the research methods, the research process and the sample. Then we present main findings, focusing on the frequency of absence matters; interrupted everyday life; absence of a parent at important life events and transitions; coping with absence; everyday issues, such as communicating with the absent parent and the importance (and disadvantages) of technology; and finally, on the upbringing issues as seen by adult children from military families. In the final chapter we discuss main findings and offer some thoughts about their consequences.

Life course, deployment and family life

We base our analysis on the theoretical framework of the life course approach.

> The life course concept is simultaneously individual-psychological: it refers to changes in an individual's biographical experience and identity as well as social integration over the life course, and also macro-sociological: it refers to social, institutional structural changes in social and historical time that influence the life course. (Ule, 2011, p. 17)

It illuminates the powerful and interdependent relationships between individual lives and the historical, social, political, and economic contexts in which those lives are lived (Elder, 1974; Elder et al., 2015). An individual biography is a sequence of transitions between different life stages and situations. As a result, transitions are usually associated with significant uncertainties that need to be addressed as we move into a new stage of life – and thus present a unique life challenge (Ule, 2011). The life course perspective provides a tool for identifying and exploring critical moments or turning points in the life course, where both risks and opportunities accumulate (Heinz, 1997; Heinz et al., 2009). Therefore, life course focuses on understanding how an individual's life unfolds and develops over time, in different periods of life, such as childhood, youth, adulthood, old-age, as well as different in life domains, such as education, family and health and hence refers to the linear and vertical component of life, to individual and social participation in different stages of life (childhood, adolescence, adulthood, old age) (Ule, 2011). Thus, using the life course approach to examine perceptions of growing up in military families allows us to focus our attention on specific life events and transitions. We are particularly interested in prolonged and repeated parental absences and their impact on children's daily lives.

We also draw on the concepts of everyday life, where everyday life represents the cyclical component, the horizontal of life, of the typical ways of being, acting, thinking, and experiencing that are expressed in everyday routines, habits, and practices (Certeau, 1984; Lefebvre, 1971). A particularly important component of everyday life is its cyclicality, stability and predictability, which is expressed mainly in the routines and habits of everyday life, although it is not only tied to routines, as leisure, vacations, vacations,

special celebrations are also part of everyday life and manifest its vitality, contingency (Lefebvre, 1971). Predictability also means that everyday life is mainly unquestioned and taken for granted – we live it largely spontaneously, without constant conscious action or questioning of its content, and this gives us the security and comfort of being able to devote ourselves to other (vertical) activities that are important in our lives, such as knowledge acquisition, education, work, career advancement, leisure activities, volunteerism, etc. However, long-term parental deployments significantly disrupt these family and individual routines. In our analysis, both dimensions will be of interest as we examine growing up in childhood, focusing on the impact of parental absence on the child's and family's daily life. Children are particularly vulnerable in this regard because multiple and prolonged parental absences are both developmentally and psychologically important and affect children's well-being, as do the altered dynamics, routines, and interpersonal relationships in daily life that require multiple adjustments (departure-arrival) to new patterns.

The effects of deployment on family dynamics and children's psychological well-being are of interest in that they involve changes in everyday family dynamics and a high degree of adjustment in everyday lives of all family members. Previous research in the SAF (Vuga Beršnak, 2021) found that, according to parents, children did not experience serious problems due to parental deployment, but preschool-aged children showed signs of rebellion and took some time to accept their father upon his return, and they became more attached to other relatives (e.g. grandparents) who took over the caregiving responsibilities of the absent parent. The children also expressed their discomfort and uncertainty about a possible redeployment. Younger children expressed their feelings in the form of fear, while slightly older children expressed their feelings in the form of anger at the military 'who kept taking their father away from them' (Vuga Beršnak, 2021).

Research shows that one of the most important negative factors of parental absence due to IOM is the disruption of routines in the child's life. Family and child routines are disrupted not only when a parent leaves, followed by a period of adjustment to the new reality, but also when a parent returns, disrupting the (newly) established routine and requiring reacclimating to the new routine (Huebner et al., 2007; Bullock, 2017). These disruptions impact not only daily family routines, but perhaps more importantly, family relationships, which are also subject to significant fluctuations (Bóia et al., 2018; Skomorovsky & Bullock, 2017). Military families, therefore, are in a multiple cycle of separation and restoration of family life and relationships (Sheppard et al., 2010), which involves major adjustments to everyday family life, which in turn increases the risk of child behavioural and emotional difficulties during and after deployment (Flake et al., 2009; Jaycox et al., 2016; Lester et al., 2010, 2011; Wilson et al., 2014). In addition, research shows that parental absence has profound effects on children's well-being and mental health, which is also relevant to deployment (in wartime or peacekeeping); a number of studies report increased mental health difficulties and challenges, deterioration in children's mental health, lower quality of life, increased anxiety and depression, more difficulties at school (Chandra et al., 2011; Chartrand et al., 2008; Cramm et al., 2016; Misra and Singh, 2014; Reed et al., 2011), and even increased hospitalizations of children for mental health problems (Millegan et al., 2013). In coping and adapting to the new family situation, children's age and developmental stage, and thus their ability to comprehend and understand the absence of a parent, play an important role

(Andres & Moelker, 2011; Chandra et al., 2011; Flake et al., 2009; Lester et al., 2011; Osofsky & Chartrand, 2013; Trautmann et al., 2015).

Factors that either mitigate or promote (negative) changes in the child are primarily the child's age and ability to understand the situation, the quality of the parent–child relationship prior to the prolonged absence (Andres & Moelker, 2011; Miller et al., 2010), parental mental health (Foran et al., 2017; Lester et al., 2010), family dynamics, communication, and resilience (Riggs & Riggs, 2011; Saltzman et al., 2011; Wilson et al., 2014; Wilson et al., 2014). In analysing children's psychosocial outcomes related to military life stressors based on data from the Millennium Cohort Family Study, Briggs et al. (2019) the 'importance of examining the "whole child" within the broader environmental and military family context to understand factors associated with children's mental and behavioural health' (2019, p. 75), as the results of their study point to the complex family relationships that strongly influence children's outcomes and show that military families face multiple stressors related to parents' military service.

Methods

The instrument (semi-structured questionnaire) was developed within a life course theory approach that provides a holistic, interdisciplinary framework for exploring human life from birth to death (Mayer, 2009) and focuses on exploring how chronological age, life transitions, relationships, and social change shape our lives (Hutchison, 2019). Building on the theoretical–conceptual framework of the life course approach (Elder et al., 2015; Elder & Giele, 2009; Heinz, 2009; Hutchison, 2019; Mortimer & Shanahan, 2003) and analytical findings based on previously conducted quantitative and qualitative research within the same project (Military-Specific Risk Factors for Military Family Health and Well-Being) (Vuga Beršnak et al., 2020; Vuga Beršnak et al., 2023; Vuga Beršnak & Lobe, 2024), we identified key research themes: Family, childhood reflection, connected lives, life transitions, life events and turning points, satisfaction with (family) life, and individual risk management strategies in everyday life. These themes served as the basis for the construction of the instrument.

The main research question was: *what are the characteristics of life course, growing up and everyday life in military families in Slovenia?* We were particularly interested in:

- How do children experience and live everyday life in a military family as they grow up?
- How do they experience the prolonged and usually recurring absence of one or both parents due to the demands of military service?
- How does the absence of one or both parents affect their daily lives, life course, and transitions?
- What coping strategies do they develop and use in their everyday lives to deal with the absence and other unique features of growing up in military families?

Sample and data collection

We conducted retrospective semi-structured in-depth interviews with adult children from military families between December 2021 and March 2022. Due to Covid 19 restrictions, interviews were conducted online using the ZOOM platform. Interviews were

audio recorded and transcribed. One interview was conducted in English (at the request of the interviewee), the others in Slovenian. The interviewees were not compensated for their contribution, their participation in the interviews was completely voluntary. All interviewees have read and signed Informed consent form in which they agreed that anonymized data obtained during the research will be used for the purposes of this research during and after completion of the project (e.g. preparation of a report, scientific publications).

Qualitative research allows smaller samples since the main aim is to provide in-depth and rich information of the phenomenon under study (Braun & Clarke, 2019; Vasileiou et al., 2018). We looked for young adults who grew up in military families and had experienced deployment or some other type of operational long term absence of a parent. We conducted interviews that required a high level of intimacy and emotional input. Therefore, we decided to use the snowball method to find people who were comfortable talking to us. As we were aiming for a diversity of experiences (family experiences are indeed very diverse), we were looking for new interviewees as long as we got new/different insights.

The sampling was purposive and included two conditions for participation:

(1) While the respondent was growing up, at least one parent was employed by the SAF and deployed to at least one IOM (six months or longer) or/and was overseas due to training exercises (six months or longer) or/and the entire family moved to a post overseas.
(2) Age of majority.

The original sample consisted of 14 adult children from 12 military families in Slovenia who were between 21 and 38 years old at the time of the interview. However, for the purposes of this paper, we will not include one of the interviews because it was a one-time extended absence at a time when the interviewee was less than a year old and does not remember that period. Therefore, we will analyse the interviews with 13 adult children from 11 families. Most military parents were fathers, in one case it was the mother, and in one case both parents were employed by the SAF. Of the adult children interviewed, six moved abroad due to the father's job (military) requirements, and five of them reported parental separation. One of the interviewees had completed upper secondary education, 12 of them had either completed a tertiary education programme or were enrolled in one at the time of the interview. Of these 12, 6 are studying or planning to study in the field of defence sciences or international relations, both of which are relevant for possible employment in the military. Only basic demographic data are presented in Table 1 to preserve the anonymity of the participants.

Data analysis

Interviews were analysed and coded following reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; 2012; 2019; and using NVivo software and the guidelines of a six-step process for data engagement, coding, and theme development: (1) familiarization with the data and writing familiarization notes: transcripts was read and reread several times, in this process outlines for initial codes were made and research notes were

Table 1. Participants.

Code	Gender	Number/frequency of parent's absence	Age of the child (respondent) during parental absence[b]	Age range of the respondent (in the time of the interview)[b]
I1[a]	F	Once	Less than a year old	Between 20 and 25
I2	M	Several times	Throughout the childhood	Between 26 and 30
I3	F	Once	Between 10 and 15	Between 20 and 25
I4	F	Several times	Throughout the childhood	Between 20 and 25
I5	M	Several times	Throughout the childhood	Between 26 and 30
I6	M	Several times	Throughout the childhood	Between 26 and 30
I7	F	Several times	Throughout the childhood	Between 31 and 35
I8	F	Several times	Throughout the childhood	Between 36 and 40
I9	M	Twice	Between 15 and 20	Between 26 and 30
I10	F	Twice	Between 10 and 15	Between 20 and 25
I11	M	Several times	Throughout the childhood	Between 20 and 25
I12	M	Several times	Throughout the childhood	Between 20 and 25
I13	F	Several times	Throughout the childhood	Between 20 and 25
I14	F	Several times	Throughout the childhood	Between 20 and 25

[a]Excluded from analysis due to one-time extended absence of a parent in the early childhood that the respondent cannot recall.
[b]To protect respondent anonymity, ages are approximate rather than precise.

taken related to researcher's observation of the gathered material; all three authors participated in this step and discussed initial observation; (2) systematic coding of the data was carried out by one of the authors; (3) generation of initial themes from the coded and collated data – all three authors reviewed and discussed the identified codes and generated initial themes in relation to the research question, which provided the opportunity to explore the data further; (4) development and review of themes; after the initial themes one author reviewed the codes again and then identified more clearcut themes; (5) refinement, definition, and naming of themes: in this step all three authors met again and discussed the identified themes and codes and defined and named the final themes and (6) authors wrote research report (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

After the analytical process of familiarizing with the data, coding the data and linking acquired data with the research questions, researchers agreed that sufficient information was gathered and informativeness was achieved in the sample of 14 respondents. Authors agreed code saturation was achieved (Hennink et al., 2017) as no new (relevant) codes which would affect acknowledged themes were identified in the last three interviews and coding scheme achieved stability.

Findings

In this section, the research findings are presented based on the themes identified and supported by quotes from the interviews. Short description of themes is presented in Table 2.

The frequency of absence matters: when presence becomes unusual

Long-term parental absences have a significant impact on children's everyday lives and life course transitions. They cannot go unnoticed, as a family member suddenly leaves while the family remains in the same environment, and such a situation makes the absence constantly present and visible, especially in the family's everyday routines and practices, along with parental childrearing practices, especially during childhood.

Table 2. Description of themes.

Theme	Description of theme
The frequency of absence matters: when presence becomes unusual	Coping with parental absences was referred through number, frequency, and length of absences, which shaped the response in everyday life of respondents and it's impact on the life transitions and life paths (life course).
Interrupted everyday life: in search of a balance	The departure or/and return of absent parent represented a significant disruption to everyday life and unbalanced established family life, which triggered multiple or continual search for a balance in everyday life.
When a parent is absent at times of important life events and transitions	Respondents described their emotions and coping with the absence of parents in specific life situation or life transitions, with a special emotional significance to them. Theme refers to vertical (life course) and horizontal (everyday life) components of respondents'' lives.
Emotional coping with absence: age and fears for the parent	Respondents described their emotional coping with the absence of parents in times of absence (everyday life) and through subjectively observed changes of their changes of emotional coping during growing up (life course).
Communicating with the absent parent: the importance (and disadvantages) of technology	Respondents described the challenges of communication with the absent parent and its influence on their everyday life, feelings of parental support and involvement, relationship with parents in times of absence (everyday life) as well as its influence on their life course.

However, its strength, influence, and potentially long-term impact on children's life trajectories depend heavily on the number and/or frequency of absences. When absences occurred once or twice, the shock of a sudden change predominated, and the entire family was focused on mobilizing strength and resources to survive this limited period, e.g.: 'The [family] conversation was more along the lines that this time will pass quickly because she will be home soon and everything will be the same' (I3). In such situations, the family dealt with the absence in the short term – as a period of time to be survived until everything returns to normal. Although this strategy was mainly used by families who had to cope with a single or double absence, it is also a distinct process in all families who had to cope with the absence for the first or second time.

However, as absences became more frequent, families adapted and no longer just waited for the absent member to return – they had to find a way to maintain family life in both situations – in attendance and in absence. Absence becomes a habit, it is no longer an unusual phase in family life, but becomes commonplace: 'But after a while it becomes, how shall I say, a habit, right, you just get used to [the parent] going on a mission somewhere … and you get used to living without them.' (I5).

And if the absences increase even more, suddenly there is no more 'normal family life', it simply does not exist, because the absences are too frequent and too long, so that the usual family life cannot establish itself. However, the impact is not limited to the habits of everyday family life, but also spills over into the parent–child relationship and family roles. As one respondent vividly described, her childhood was marked by questioning of the role of adults and parents in her life:

> Oh … I mean, when I was very young, I think it's a time when my father had to be absent the most. So, I just didn't really quite understand what his role was at the beginning, I just thought he was another adult who would hang around me and my mom / … / So yeah, when very little, like, it's just figuring out what their roles were in my life because it would be so changed. (I14)

> I remember that being one of the bigger disappointments where I felt like, do I get to hang out with you guys [parents] at all. Um, yeah, I think that was one of the bigger disappointments just in general during that period from like being born to about six. Because, like I said, I didn't understand who was who. I didn't understand if my grandma was playing the role of my parents, if my parents were playing the role of my parents. Just like, what are you guys doing in my life? It just felt like a bunch of adults who were hovering around me, but not knowing why exactly. So, anything during that time period was like, Man, I don't know what's happening. (I14)

Interrupted everyday life: in search of a balance

In families where long-term parental absence was (or still is) very common, and especially when both parents were in the military, the disruptions to everyday life were so great that children could not even identify 'everyday family routines'. In such situations, children expressed confusion about everything related to family life and the role of family members. In such cases, the importance of an unquestionable, balanced routine of everyday family life becomes particularly clear, as do the negative consequences of absence:

> Q: If you think back to your childhood, what is the first thing that comes to mind? How do you remember your childhood? I: Hhm … confusion. Just very confused all the time (laughs). I mean, partially from the moving and partially because my family dynamic was so different from most around me. So, I think I was just very confused most of the time. And then when I thought I figured things out, something would change. So, just confused. I was happy, I had everything I needed, uhm, I mean, I was taken care of. I am very privileged, I am very, very lucky, but uhm, yes, I guess you are just confused. So that would be the general consensus. / … / But obviously you're little like, um, you're obviously a little sad because you're in this perpetual limbo of like, you're back. Now I'm used to you. Let's live like a family. Oh, no, you got to go now. I got to get used to leaving. (I14)

Further, according to children, absenteeism in some military families is not limited to the time of deployments, but can also occur during everyday life, due to long work hours, and commuting. As one example,

> There were also weeks when I didn't see my father. I woke up at seven, he was already at work, I was home at four, ate, went to bed at nine, he came back at ten. So sometimes there were whole weeks where we didn't see each other at all / … / But a lot of times, let's say, he'd come home at four or before I got home from school, and then he'd work at home, yeah, so there wasn't much difference [compared to the times he was on duty]. (I6)

> I find that he's been pretty absent since I came on the scene, so it didn't affect me that he wasn't present [when he was at IOM]. (I6)

In families with an established family life, routines, and relationships, on the other hand, each time a family member leaves the family for an extended period, the family must adjust, find a new balance, and the role of the absent family member must be replaced by someone else. The more resilient the family is and the quicker it can reorganize, the less or more manageable the strain of the absence.

> At home we just got used to the routine that he is not there and then when he comes home it was always, not exactly a shock that we had some conflict, but it is a shock that, first of all, the father has to find his role at home again, to go to work. It is now different, plus also for us at home we had to change the routine. (I5)

In addition to the changes in daily routines, the children often spoke of having to find a place, a role, for the absent parent again. The returning parent must reestablish or even renegotiate his or her position and especially his or her role as a parent in the family. This process affected children the most, as they suddenly had more adults at home to whom they must submit and obey.

> Sometimes I felt like, I'd say, because I was so used to my mom handling things, sometimes it was unnecessary for me to have him tell me things now because it wasn't so conscious, but in the sense that you weren't here, I'm already taking instructions, why are you interfering … But I don't know, I got used to it pretty quickly, but yeah, it was different because now there was someone else I was taking instructions from, and so on. (I7)

It is also interesting that the children often said that the return of the parent affected their daily life more than the departure for deployment.

> At the time [returning from IOM], I think it was a bit of a shock that he was back, and then you kind of have to get used to your dad being back. I think it was a little different when he came back than when he left, it was also harder to accept that he was back now. (I13)

In some families or at certain stages of a family life, absence leaded to a greater imbalance in the family, sometimes even severely affecting the parenting practices and parenting skills of the remaining parent:

> Yeah, it was a little bit different then, my mother was alone, my sister and I were at an odd age, so in those phases, in those difficult phases, I don't know, so, it was quite nervous, my father wasn't there, I don't know, it was nervous, nervous, it was tense in the family when my father wasn't there. (I9)

Some interviewees specifically pointed to the absence of paternal authority: 'And this is where the father was really missing, that he was in charge / … / When he was absent, this [family] dynamic often got a lot worse, because we all wanted to fill these new roles.' (I5). We see that absence not only leads to changes in established (physical) routines but can also significantly alter emotional stability and relationships in the family, for example: lack of parental (family) role and support:

> In the teenage years, especially when you're a boy, I think you need a lot of fathering, from wisdom to a firm hand, and here my brother and I had conflicts with each other that basically only he could solve, and my mother couldn't either. So, I think these years are the worst for the absence of a parent because there are so many challenges, you need someone, you need a special paternal hand, right. (I5)

Such a disruption of emotional balance causes many disturbances in the family and significantly complicates children's well-being.

Another related difficulty is also the parental burden that was suddenly shifted completely, or at least to a large extent, to the parent remaining at home, who had to meet all the physical, psychological, and emotional needs of the children. Interviewees repeatedly described the remaining parent as being overwhelmed with household and parenting tasks, 'Yes, my mum took over everything, and that was a lot for her at the time, and she was quite nervous.' (I9). Sometimes this led to resentment and conflict between the parents:

> Of course there were many conflicts between my parents because of my father's work, and my mother was always annoyed that my father would go on a mission or training or

> something and then be gone for days or even months at a time, and of course that brought some conflicts. (I5)

In many families, the additional family burden during the absence was distributed among all family members, not just the remaining parent. Children in these families were therefore often soon forced to take on a larger role in family life, e.g. more involvement in household chores, helping younger siblings, and also to take on more responsibility for their own lives sooner, e.g. through independence in leisure activities, school commitments:

> The first word that comes to mind is pretty independent, I think they brought us up pretty quickly and let us take care of ourselves. We knew how to cook for ourselves, we knew how to take care of ourselves, how to do the laundry, how to take care of the household, as much as a kid can take care of. (I6)

In some cases, the children spoke not only about early independence, but even about the lack of parental upbringing, about a kind of self-upbringing and even about raising of their siblings:

> Oh, upbringing, mostly I upraised myself, and my brother too. Because both my parents were nowhere, my mother was working, my father was abroad. But I have to say that we both grew up very well, we still took a lot of positive things from the situation, nobody got in trouble, we both finished school well, so despite everything we took that little bit of what you should call upbringing from our parents. (I8)

However, some children faced even more radical intrusions into their everyday lives during childhood, when the demands of work in the SAF led entire families moving to another country for extended periods of time (sometimes several times). In this case, although the family stayed together and was not burdened by the absence itself, the children faced various transitions, often extremely stressful psychologically, related mainly to the sudden departure from their social and institutional environment, especially peers, friends, and school, and the equally difficult or even more difficult integration into a new (institutional) environment, language, and culture. In retrospect, the children interviewed see such a move as an opportunity for their personal development, an important factor in their identity development, an increase in their adaptability, an introduction to a different world that may lead to greater individual resilience during their future biography. In any case, however, such transitions and the significant changes in everyday life that they entail represent a unique psychosocial challenge for children and families. Generally positive retrospective view towards past challenges in life might also be identified as rationalized coping mechanism. In the absence of alternative paths, as one path had already been chosen by the adults and simultaneously excluded all other paths (including staying at home, in familiar environment), there is no option left other than cope as well as possible.

When parent is not here: important life events and transitions

Special life transitions and events with specific emotional and social content for children and families, such as celebrations, graduations, competitions, and special achievements, are another important aspect of life with absent parents in military families. When

parents are absent from events that are of special importance to children, it can create additional emotional and mental challenges for children:

> Whenever it was my birthday and my parent was not there, it was like, oops. I counted. My dad couldn't come for my sibling's birthday, who was upset about it. And I remember getting angry, like, you don't even know, it's only your second birthday when he's not here for you. And I started counting, and I've had eight birthdays like that. (I14)

Lack of parental support in important life transitions, events or challenges was noted especially in repeated, long-term absences, when children felt the absence even before it actually happened and were left to cope with it, for example:

> But, you know, it was the big ones. I think we would be like, oh, I'm leaving for six months. I'm leaving for seven months. / … / Okay, what are all the events that are going to happen in this time period? / … / But if it was like during a time, like if I knew that their leave would affect, like, any time I had exams, I'd be a little stressed out because I was like, oh, I need as much support as I need during this time, but you're not going to be here. (I14)

However, it is not only the absence as such that is significant (not being present to witness or celebrate achievements) or the lack of parental support at important moments in the child's life, but it is the comparison with peers that makes this very visible and tangible. Comparison with peers provides a certain social framework for how children and parents are connected and present in children's lives. When children realize that most other children's parents are there while their own are absent, this can lead to feelings of lack, loneliness, etc., for example:

> So, at New Year's she wasn't there because it was the fall-winter period, and that's when it was especially hard for me because I saw that the neighbours were celebrating and I saw that the other children had their parents home, and I knew why she wasn't there, but … There was a moment when it was really hard because I really missed being home as a family. (I3)

Nevertheless, many of the children interviewed reported that parents themselves did not want to miss out on the special transitions and important events of children and made a lot of effort to reconcile the most significant events and transitions in their children's lives with their work, sometimes even by planning a special mission leave in advance.

Emotional coping with absence: age and fears for the parent

Children growing up in military families whose parents participate in IOMs must somehow cope with the absence of their parents. As the interviews clearly show, this was a major challenge for them. Absence was not 'present' only in the form of altered daily routines and relationships, but also left an emotional footprint. And children had no choice but to deal with these emotions, successfully or unsuccessfully. A child's age and associated cognitive abilities are an important factor in their ability to deal with these emotions.

> When I was younger, I didn't understand these missions, what exactly was going on. So for me as a child, it was a big shock to be separated from my parents for so long. / … / When he first left, I was a very young child, so it was a big shock to me, I wanted to hear my father, I didn't understand why he wasn't there, so I started to hate his job a little bit. (I5)

Each phase of growing up brought up specific challenges. In early childhood, a child simply does not understand when a parent is suddenly absent, thus a lack of understanding of the situation and general absence of the parent prevail. A very important aspect of parental absence is also that children are simply forced into this absence, as they have no choice and are not involved in decision making. When a child is suddenly confronted with the reality that a parent is not there, negative feelings such as anger and fear can arise.

Deployments were also an emotional challenge for children and families, as they were accompanied, at least in some cases, by fears for the absent parent, which the children coped with and rationalized in their own way, which was also strongly related to the developmental phase they were in during the IOM. This anxiety, especially in early childhood, was often associated with a lack of knowledge about the situation or a lack of communication about the conditions of the departure:

> Yeah, when I was younger I was afraid of it because when you're a kid you don't understand what's going on down there, how it works and things like that, and I was more afraid of the unknown than anything else. (I5)

However, with increasing age and a certain familiarity with the general situation, activities, conditions and working methods at the IOM, the fear often remained or even increased, albeit transformed, also because of the many unknowns of the actual situation and work at the IOM, e.g.

> Yes, yes, always [worrying about the parent at the IOM]. Because basically I never knew where he was even, where this foreign country is, I don't know even now where he has been. I don't care, foreign country is foreign country, when you're young it doesn't matter. The main word there is war, conflict, and you're afraid. (I2)

> It was never clear to me what he was really doing. I didn't know what his workday was like. I think the first time I visited him, and we were walking around the city, he said to me that the environment was a bit bad, and that it wasn't good that I was walking around there alone or that he was in uniform. / … / I mean, I think, yeah, there are moments where he's a little bit more in danger, but I wasn't really afraid that anything was going to happen to him. (I7)

On the other hand, knowledge of the work process also reduced anxiety to some extent:

> But especially when I was older, I kind of knew how the processes worked, what the situation was. Then of course it's a little bit easier, then you're not as afraid of it as before. But when I was younger, I had that fear, but I think that's normal, but not when you're younger and you don't know what's going on. (I5)

A very important fact that took the fear away from children and families and made it manageable was the fact that the SAF is involved in peacekeeping operations and not combat operations: 'I wasn't worried about him because I was aware of the situation. And the way he told me, I knew that there probably wouldn't be any complications like that or that he'd go out there to shoot.' (I9) A similar fear-reducing factor were the conditions of the job, i.e. working in an office rather than in the field: 'No [I wasn't afraid for the father] because I think he was mostly just in the office because he works in the office here too, his job was office work, so I wasn't afraid anyway.' (I10)

> Um, that would depend on where (laughs) [the parents are deployed]. If they were saying, I'm just going somewhere to, you know, talk diplomacy. Then I'd be like, that's fine. You go talk your diplomacy. Um, if it would be like, I'm going somewhere where things aren't so good right now, you'd be a little more … Oh man, that's kind of dangerous. Don't do that. So, it would depend. (I14)

A high level of trust in the parents' abilities also reduces anxiety:

> Scared? Basically, when I started to understand a little bit where, what kind of job he has and what's going on there, I was a little bit, yeah … It's not that good, but yeah, I got used to it and I know he's good at it and I know he can stand up for himself, so yeah. (I4)

In early youth, negative emotions were already processed cognitively and could find other (objective) rationalizations, such as the 'greater good', in this case patriotism:

> For half a year he is literally taken away from me by the state, and I can't have contact with him like that. But as I got older, I understood, and when my father goes on a mission, I started to pack this mental package, like it's good for the homeland, for the country. (I5)

Communicating with the absent parent: the importance (and disadvantages) of technology

Communication with family during the IOM changed significantly at the beginning of this millennium with the advent and widespread availability of technology, which completely transformed the frequency of communication and the (usually daily) availability and form of communication with an absent family member. One particularly important innovation was the possibility of video communication, which enabled family members to maintain visual contact. Daily accessibility also significantly changed the sense of support for the child and involvement in parenting that the absent family member could provide even from a distance:

> And it [IOM] takes a long time, he's gone a long time, because that's how it was in the beginning, there was no technology, you couldn't see each other, you couldn't hear each other. All that was missing, and the absence lasted for months. But now, thank God, technology is patching the holes. (I8)

All respondents stated that they communicated with their parents daily or at least very frequently, mostly in the evenings, with conversations usually revolving around everyday, incidental events. Some even reported more intensive, even more intimate contact with the absent parent than in person at home, e.g.:

> I think you get used to that long- distance communication and you can tell a lot more and more easily through technology, because in person you suddenly might not know what to say. It's different, [in person] there's no distance, suddenly you're face to face, and you see the reactions a lot more. (I8)

However, daily or frequent long-distance communication also had some disadvantages and a negative impact on everyday routines because, as one interviewee explained, such communication was a constant reminder 'that he is not there' (I5), whereas less frequent communication made it possible to compensate for absence in the daily routine. Some interviewees also emphasized the different level of communication due to physical distance and lack of face-to-face communication,

> Because it's also different … people don't understand … It's different to talk to a person on Zoom, like with your father, than to talk about something like that [smiling], than to see them in person, physically. That physical contact makes a difference that people don't understand unless they have experience. (I5)

Some interviewees even pointed to a certain awkwardness in everyday long-distance communication, which has become a necessary daily routine due to technological progress, replacing presence. Indeed, they have felt a (familial or social) pressure to be connected every day, but in this communication there is no space for silence, which must be avoided at all costs, no space to just be there, to be together, and that is quite different from a silence in togetherness, e.g.:

> Yes, basically this communication via 'Skype' is, I don't know, like that, because, let's say what a family does in the evening, it's a normal working day, you watch a bit TV in the evening, you watch TV and you say two words, you watch again TV, you talk a bit, you have a bit of fun. But half the time you talk on Skype, you don't know what to say because the routine is that you don't talk about anything, there aren't that many interesting things that have happened, and then communicating on Skype is a bit 'awkward'. But you just tell him what you have to say, you go to sleep, and that's it. The next day you hear from each other again, but it can't be quite the same as a normal daily routine [in the present]. (I9)

Some interviewees also reported censored or deliberate communication with the absent parent, which they had agreed with their family. These 'measures' were agreed to protect the absent member and not to burden them with certain potentially distressing events in everyday family life, e.g. 'I remember we just didn't tell him if something happened [in the family] that would have upset him for no reason' (I9). 'At that time, it was more like we didn't want to worry her further because she wasn't with us anyway. We thought if something would happen to us, we wouldn't tell her right away.' (I3).

Discussion

Growing up in a military family with long-term and frequently absent parents presented children and families with unique psychosocial challenges. Retrospective interviews of adult children have shown that the absence of parents had a strong influence on the individual biography and everyday life of the children. Regarding the impact of the frequency of absence on children's lives, research findings show that single or isolated absences had a clear and visible impact mainly on the immediate daily life of children and the family, i.e. on the horizontal dimension and cyclical time in everyday life (especially on daily routines, practices and relationships). However, we have only limited insight into the long-term consequences of individual absences on the vertical dimension of the life course; here the influence would mainly relate to the affective and emotional component of the children's life course, which is not directly measurable within the methodology of this study.

On the other hand, frequent and recurring absences had a visible and strong impact both on the immediate everyday life and on life paths in general, since absences were no longer exceptional events in family life, but normal, continuous and familiar events in the everyday life of families and children, or in other words, frequent absences affected the cyclical and vertical dimension of time in the lives of children. In terms of the vertical dimension, we can see that six of the eleven interviewees followed in their parents'

footsteps and aspired to join the military, which can be seen as a very direct and measurable influence of the parents (direct and/or implicit) on the child's educational and professional path, and furthermore, five of the interviewees moved abroad during their childhood because their parents were employed in the military, which significantly influenced their life path.

In terms of the horizontal dimension of everyday life, the most visible and emotionally challenging effects were the many interruptions and changes to everyday routines over which the children had no control, but with which they had to cope. Similar to other research, our findings suggest that due to several deployments families were in a vertigo of multiple cycles of separation and restoration of family life and relationships, requiring extensive and varied adjustments to everyday family life (Sheppard et al., 2010). Sometimes the absences were so frequent that the children were confused about the parents' role in their lives, and sometimes the everyday family routine, which generally provides a sense of security and belonging, simply could not be established because the interruptions were too numerous. Sometimes whole families were under stress and tried to cope as best they could. Our study confirmed other research findings that in terms of family everyday routine and balance, parents' return caused bigger challenges to the family than parents departure to IOM (Huebner et al., 2007; Bullock, 2017). Often the military demands overwhelmed the (usually non-military) parent who stayed at home, and sometimes the absence led to disagreements and conflict between parents, resulting in deteriorating relationships both between parents and between parents and children. The family stress caused by absence could also be reflected in the parents' divorce rate; in our study, five interviewees from four families (out of 11 families included in the study) reported that their parents had divorced. However, we cannot claim that military employment and the demands it places on families were the sole or primary reason for the separations, but the data indicate that separations may be seen as another signal of the stress families face due to the prolonged absence of a family member. These findings confirm the findings of a previous study conducted in Slovenia from the parents' perspective. Both adult children (this study) and parents (Vuga Beršnak, 2021) recognize that stress is unequally distributed and that non-military spouses are more likely than military spouses to postpone their work obligations due to family demands and experience more stress when they are concerned about the health and well-being of the family (Vuga Beršnak et al., 2023). In addition, family functioning during deployment is highly dependent on the well-being and coping skills of the stay-at-home parent.

Depending on their frequency and resilience of the family, the absences led to more or less important changes in parenting practices, the parent–child relationship, the parent-parent relationship and the division of household and care work. Children were often pushed to take on a greater role in family life earlier than in civilian families, e.g. more involvement in housework, helping younger siblings, and also to take on more responsibility for their own lives earlier, e.g. independence in leisure activities, school commitments. However, these effects were not limited to the immediate everyday life, as it may seem at first glance, but had a long-term impact on the children's life courses, as family relationships and parenting practices are building blocks for children's emotional balance and identity. In the context of this study and its methodology, it is not possible to scientifically assess whether these effects are positive or negative, but as the

interviewees themselves acknowledge, absences not only change family life, but also their own emotions, coping and view of life.

Another particularly difficult emotional challenge for children was the fear for their parents. When they were very young, their parents simply disappeared from their lives; as they grew older, their parents left for high-risk IOMs, and when they returned, the children already knew that they would soon leave again. Depending on their age and cognitive abilities, children dealt with their fear in different ways (as other research has already found, e.g. Andres & Moelker, 2011; Osofsky & Chartrand, 2013; Chandra et al., 2011; Trautmann et al., 2015; Flake et al., 2009; Lester et al., 2011), but primarily through tactics to reduce fear by clinging to 'favourable' conditions (e.g. telling themselves that IOM or peacekeeping missions are not that dangerous, believing that the parent actually works in the office, trusting security procedures and protocols, believing that the parent is capable of protecting themselves and everyone else, etc.). However, the psychological strain of the children's absence was also evident in the fear for their parents, despite a number of 'protective' factors, the first of which is certainly the nature of the tasks that Slovenian military personnel perform within the IOM (i.e. not on combat duty).

For children and families, the fear is manageable as long as they believe that their parents are not involved in direct combat operations; therefore, the risk of being killed is considered lower. If SAF were to participate in combat operations, a huge increase in psychological distress and suffering among children of military families would be expected, related to the lack of knowledge and information on the one hand, and the unequal cognitive abilities to perceive and process the situation at different stages of development and the real risk of injury and/or loss of life of parents on the other. In addition, combat stress in soldiers leads to psychological stress and PTSD, which in turn affects the entire family, including the children and their psychological well-being (Foran et al., 2017).

Coping emotionally with the absence of parents is in itself a major challenge for any child, but coping with an absence where the parent's life may be threatened is an even greater challenge. A psychological assessment of the impact of such fears and anxieties is beyond the scope of this study, but it is clear that they have an impact on children's well-being as they occur during the psychologically critical period of growing up. Therefore, the emotional burden of the anxiety experienced cannot simply be over when the parent returns, as the seeds of fear and doubt have already been sown. These effects are long-term, especially for the children whose parents are often absent in IOMs, as they become a part of (emotional) life; what changes are the tools for coping with such anxiety (along with many rationalizations), but the emotional footprint remains in the children's everyday lives throughout the life course.

Today's communication options, especially video calls, significantly mitigate the some of the disadvantages of long-term absence, even if they can by no means replace the presence of parents. However, such communication options have some weaknesses, such as creating communication as a necessity without the emotional benefit of actual presence. They can also serve as a constant reminder of the parent's absence, rather than allowing the children to adapt to the new situation and develop a new rhythm of life because the parent is not there. Despite some disadvantages, communication is an important tool to mitigate various aspects of deployment (e.g. coping with anxiety, keeping the absent

parent informed about the child's daily activities and important events, and keeping the children informed about the absent parent's daily routine) and to involve the absent parent more fully in the family.

Finally, it should be noted that this was a retrospective study in which the adult interviewees were asked to recall and describe events and emotions from their childhood and adolescence, five, ten or even 20 years ago. During the research process, it became very clear that these memories are still very vivid years later, confirming that their parents' deployments were impactful experiences for the children that did indeed shape their wellbeing and other aspects of their lives, and to some extent still do. Although interviewees generally had a very positive attitude towards these challenges in retrospect, claiming that they had made them stronger, more organized, independent, experienced and even a more helpful member of society, we must acknowledge, at least to some extent, that these are rationalizations and a coping mechanism in situations where one has no choice but to adapt as best one can. There is of course no way, either for the interviewees themselves or for the researchers, to say what their life trajectory and emotional wellbeing would be like without parental deployments and the specific challenges they present.

An indisputable conclusion of this research is that military deployments affect entire families from different perspectives, as other research has already shown (e.g. Andres & Moelker, 2011; Bóia et al., 2018; Vuga Beršnak, 2021; White et al., 2011; Zellman et al., 2009, etc.). Therefore, both legislation and any policy recommendations aimed at military deployments should in principle include families and not only military personnel. Children would benefit from practices that enable shared social experiences where they are surrounded by or in contact with other children and families whose parents are deployed at the same time. Expert psychological preparation aimed not only at preparing children and families for departure, but also for coping with life without a parent and knowing what to expect and how to cope when the parent returns, would also be beneficial. An important step would also be to inform educational institutions when the children's parents are deployed so that they can anticipate, recognize and appropriately support a child who is experiencing great emotional and psychological turmoil in this case.

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Data availability statement

Data not available – participant consent; privacy/ethical restrictions. The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research supporting data is not available. Data contain information that could compromise the privacy of research participants.

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