

Attachment and Emotional Regulation in a Semi-Military Academy: a Case Study of Homesickness and Student Adaptation

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Abstract: This study presents a case of a first-year female student at Politeknik Pelayaran Surabaya who experienced intense homesickness during her transition to a semi-military academy. Drawing from direct observation, alloanamnesis, and autoanamnesis interviews, the findings reveal how her strong emotional attachment to her family, especially her mother, created persistent emotional instability that affected her academic focus, motivation, and social interactions. While she possessed adequate cognitive abilities and discipline, her emotional state often led to procrastination, withdrawal, and fluctuations in concentration. However, the student gradually developed adaptive strategies, such as peer support, marching band participation, watching videos, and structured communication with family, which strengthened her emotional regulation. The novelty of this research lies in documenting the interplay of attachment and emotional regulation within the unique context of an Indonesian semi-military academy—a field rarely explored in existing literature. Beyond theoretical contribution, the practical implications highlight the need for structured emotional regulation training, psychoeducation for parents, and peer mentoring programs to support first-year students in overcoming separation distress. By emphasizing both the challenges and adaptive processes, this study provides insights for institutions to design interventions that balance family attachment with autonomy development.

Keywords: Attachment, Emotional Regulation, Homesickness, Semi-Military Academy, Student Adaptation

1 INTRODUCTION

The bond between young people and their families significantly influences how they handle the transition to independent living, especially in highly structured environments like semi-military academies. Bowlby's foundational work on attachment (1982) emphasizes that secure attachment with caregivers creates a sense of safety but can also lead to vulnerability when separation occurs. This vulnerability often manifests as homesickness, a distressing emotional reaction that arises when students with strong family bonds are placed in unfamiliar environments (Salmi & Yasmin, 2023). The mechanism can be understood as follows: individuals with strong attachment to their families tend to experience heightened homesickness when separated from them. This homesickness often develops into emotional instability, which in turn disrupts focus, delays academic tasks, and reduces motivation. Empirical studies show that such disruptions can interfere with concentration, increase withdrawal from social activities, and negatively affect academic performance (Fisher & Hood, 1987; Putri, 2021). In other words, attachment patterns directly influence the way students cope with separation, and these coping outcomes determine the extent of academic disruption.

While existing studies on attachment and homesickness have mostly focused on conventional boarding schools or pesantren (Salmi & Yasmin, 2023), little is known about how these processes unfold in semi-military higher education contexts. Semi-military institutions, such as Politeknik Pelayaran Surabaya, impose strict discipline, dense schedules, and limited autonomy, all of which can intensify the psychological strain of homesickness. This gap is crucial because cadets are required to maintain academic performance under unique pressures of physical endurance, emotional regulation, and professional maritime training. Our case study addresses this gap by examining a first-year cadet whose intense homesickness emerged immediately upon entering Politeknik Pelayaran Surabaya. We explore her attachment style, emotional reactions, and coping strategies, and analyze how these shaped her academic motivation and adjustment to the demanding semi-military lifestyle. Findings are discussed in light of psychological theories on attachment, emotion regulation, and academic self-regulation.

2 MATERIALS AND METHODS

We adopted a qualitative case study methodology to capture the complexity of one student's adaptation experience within a semi-military higher education context. Data collection combined systematic observations across campus activities, dormitory life, and extracurricular participation with structured interviews. Both alloanamnesis (gathering information from close peers) and autoanamnesis (self-reporting from the student) were conducted to obtain comprehensive perspectives.

The participant was selected purposively because she presented marked difficulties in adapting to the semi-military environment of Politeknik Pelayaran Surabaya. She had never lived away from her family prior to enrollment and was identified by peers and mentors as experiencing intense homesickness from the beginning of her academic journey. Her strong emotional attachment to her family, frequent episodes of crying and withdrawal, and declining academic motivation despite adequate cognitive ability made her a relevant case for examining the intersection of attachment, homesickness, and academic disruption.

To ensure the validity of the interview data, we applied methodological triangulation. Information obtained from the student's self-report (autoanamnesis) was cross-checked with peer reports (alloanamnesis) and with systematic observations in both academic and non-academic contexts. Consistency across these data sources strengthened the credibility of our findings. In addition, interviews were conducted in a structured manner with follow-up probes, ensuring that responses were clear and interpretable. This multi-source and multi-method approach enhanced the trustworthiness of the data. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis, with patterns interpreted through established psychological theories on attachment, emotion regulation, and academic self-regulation.

3 RESULTS

Campus Observations

Observations in the campus environment revealed that the subject was able to engage in academic activities and complete assignments, yet her level of consistency was strongly influenced by her emotional condition. On many occasions she showed responsibility in fulfilling academic requirements, attending lectures, and taking notes carefully. She demonstrated adequate cognitive capacity to grasp the material, and even in challenging courses she was able to ask relevant questions and provide thoughtful responses. However, this stability was easily disrupted whenever her feelings of homesickness intensified. In such moments she frequently postponed starting assignments, appeared disengaged during lectures, and displayed signs of preoccupation with personal concerns rather than academic tasks. Despite this tendency to procrastinate, she consistently managed to submit her assignments on time, suggesting that the root of her academic difficulties lay more in emotional instability than in intellectual limitations.

Her behavior in class reflected this fluctuation. In technical courses such as Microcontrollers and Information Technology, she often asked questions and actively sought help from her peers, indicating an awareness of her own learning needs and a willingness to seek support. When her emotional state was stable, she participated confidently and interacted with lecturers and classmates without hesitation. When homesickness became overwhelming, however, her participation diminished, and she often adopted a more passive role, attending lectures physically but not fully engaging with the material. Patterns of concentration and attentiveness were also closely tied to her emotional state. When she was unable to return home during weekends, she tended to appear lethargic, distracted, and less motivated. She was frequently observed daydreaming or appearing absent-minded, and her body language suggested a lack of energy and enthusiasm. In contrast, after returning from weekend visits, her overall demeanor shifted. She displayed renewed vigor, interacted more actively with classmates, and followed lessons with greater attention.

This improvement, however, was temporary, as the emotional boost gained from family contact usually diminished after a few days of resuming the academy's rigid routine. Both lecturers and peers consistently noted these cycles, observing how her mood and behavior changed depending on her opportunities to visit her family. This recurring pattern highlighted the powerful influence of emotional stability on her academic engagement. Importantly, her emotional regulation strategies showed gradual development throughout the observation period. At the beginning, she often coped by isolating herself, avoiding social activities, and remaining silent in group contexts. Over time, she began to adopt more constructive strategies, such as seeking out peer support, sharing her feelings with close friends, or distracting herself through small enjoyable activities. These changes suggested a growing awareness of her own emotions and a capacity to adjust her behavior in order to remain academically functional despite emotional challenges.

In summary, observations on campus indicated that while the subject possessed sufficient intellectual capacity to succeed academically, her performance was largely determined by her emotional condition. Intense homesickness disrupted her focus and motivation, whereas supportive friendships and coping strategies helped restore her energy and enabled her to maintain her responsibilities within the demanding semi-military academic environment.

Dormitory Observations

Within the dormitory, the subject was described as tidy, perfectionist, and disciplined in carrying out her routines. Despite experiencing physical fatigue from the demanding schedule, she adhered to campus rules and responsibilities. Homesickness was expressed through crying episodes in private, feelings of emptiness, and mood deterioration whenever she was unable to return home. Extracurricular activities, particularly the marching band, provided a meaningful emotional outlet. The subject demonstrated enthusiasm, quick learning of new notations, and pride when performing at events. Although she once considered quitting due to exhaustion and internal conflict, she persisted because she felt the activity strengthened her sense of achievement. Socially, she was perceived as cheerful, humorous, and well-liked, often maintaining positive relationships with peers. However, during periods of emotional strain, she withdrew and preferred solitude to manage her feelings.

Alloanamnesis Interview Results

Information obtained from peers reinforced observational findings. Friends described her as responsible in academics but prone to postponing assignments depending on mood and energy levels. They frequently witnessed her crying, expressing a strong desire to go home, and struggling to maintain focus during stressful times. After returning from weekend leave, she appeared joyful and energetic, yet quickly reverted to sadness when campus routines resumed. Peers highlighted her extroverted nature, noting that she was sociable, supportive, and often kept the dormitory atmosphere warm. She was willing to share her struggles openly and was seen as someone who could both seek and provide support. Peers also noted her typical coping strategies—watching mukbang videos, sleeping, or calling her father to reduce distress. Over time, they observed improvements in her adjustment, as she became more accustomed to campus routines even when she could not go home.

Autoanamnesis Interview Results

In self-reports, the subject emphasized her deep emotional attachment to her mother as the main source of homesickness. She admitted to frequent crying episodes, particularly when she was unable to go home, although regular video calls with her parents offered temporary comfort. Her parents' encouragement to be strong sometimes frustrated her, but she acknowledged that it helped her gradually develop independence. She recognized that life at the academy shaped her into a more disciplined, independent, and resilient person. Although she initially disliked the semi-military system, she eventually accepted it as part of her long-term career prospects. She employed a variety of emotion regulation strategies, such as listening to music, watching videos, confiding in friends, and participating in the marching band. According to her, keeping herself busy was the most effective way to reduce homesickness.

Synthesis of Findings

Triangulation of data from observations, alloanamnesis, and autoanamnesis revealed a pattern of interconnected domains shaping the subject's experience. Academically, she demonstrated adequate cognitive abilities and awareness of her own limitations, allowing her to set realistic goals and complete tasks on time, although her motivation fluctuated in accordance with her emotional state. Emotionally and socially, her strong attachment to her family—particularly to her mother—remained the primary driver of persistent homesickness. At the same time, her extroverted personality and acceptance among peers provided essential support, helping her to sustain daily adaptation despite recurring emotional distress. Her academic motivation was also highly influenced by her emotional condition; intense homesickness often triggered procrastination and reduced focus, whereas positive reinforcement through peer support, extracurricular involvement, and structured family communication served as protective factors that restored her enthusiasm. Taken together, the subject's adjustment process reflected a complex interplay between secure family attachment, which provided comfort yet hindered independence, and campus-based resources that fostered emotional regulation and resilience. Over time, through gradual adaptation, supportive friendships, and meaningful activities such as marching band participation, she developed greater emotional balance and was able to maintain her academic responsibilities within the challenging semi-military environment.

4 DISCUSSIONS

Our findings strongly support Bowlby's theoretical framework, demonstrating that while secure attachment relationships offer emotional stability, they can also present obstacles when separation occurs without adequate preparation. The student's profound emotional connection to her family, particularly her mother, amplified her homesickness and made her initial adjustment to academy life significantly more difficult. These observations align with Fisher and Hood's (1987)

research, which identified that students with particularly close family relationships face greater vulnerability to emotional distress when transitioning to independent living. Recent work by Putri (2021) and Salmi & Yasmin (2023) confirms that students in residential or semi-structured contexts frequently experience separation difficulties when they have not previously developed emotional self-reliance. Importantly, this case highlights how the semi-military characteristics of Politeknik Pelayaran Surabaya intensified the student's emotional strain. The strict discipline, fixed daily schedules, physical exhaustion from drills and extracurricular requirements, and limited autonomy left little flexibility to cope with homesickness in a gradual way. In addition, the physical isolation of the dormitory setting and restrictions on family visits reinforced her dependence on video calls, creating a cycle of temporary relief followed by renewed distress. These structural features distinguish semi-military contexts from conventional boarding schools, making adaptation more psychologically demanding.

The student's adaptation process mirrors Gross's emotion regulation framework, demonstrating how she employed various daily strategies, including watching comforting videos, listening to music, confiding in trusted friends, and participating actively in marching band activities. These strategies exemplify how cadets attempt to reclaim emotional balance despite systemic pressures. They also reflect the broader patterns identified by Amelia & Kholidin (2025), who found that Indonesian students commonly combine emotion-focused and problem-focused coping when confronting homesickness. Similarly, Hartini et al. (2025) highlighted the crucial role of social support in this process, which was evident in the student's reliance on peer friendships and extracurricular communities. This study's strength lies in its rich qualitative detail, obtained through direct observation and comprehensive interviews, which captured the nuanced dynamics of emotional challenges, coping strategies, and gradual adjustment. Nevertheless, as a single case study, the findings cannot be generalized to all cadets, and the absence of long-term follow-up limits conclusions about sustained adaptation. Future research should expand this investigation by including more participants across different semi-military academies and by examining longitudinal outcomes. In particular, further study is needed on how institutional policies such as leave frequency, mentoring structures, and access to psychological support affect students' ability to manage homesickness and sustain motivation.

Practical implications include several targeted recommendations. First, semi-military institutions could implement structured orientation and resilience programs that gradually prepare students for separation from family while strengthening self-regulation skills. Second, peer mentoring systems involving senior cadets may provide continuous social support, helping new students normalize their struggles. Third, scheduled recreational and expressive activities (e.g., music, sports, art) could be emphasized as healthy outlets for stress release. Finally, engaging parents through psychoeducation sessions may help families encourage independence while still maintaining emotional support in adaptive ways. Together, these strategies could mitigate the heightened psychological pressures of semi-military training while fostering healthier adaptation among cadets.

5 CONCLUSIONS

This case study demonstrates how strong family connections can simultaneously provide emotional security and create obstacles when students must adapt to independent living in semi-military settings. The student's severe homesickness significantly impacted her emotional state, academic drive, and social engagement, illustrating how secure attachment without gradual separation preparation can result in adaptation difficulties. Nevertheless, through consistent peer support, engaging activities such as marching band participation, and practical coping strategies that blended emotion-focused and problem-focused approaches, she slowly built greater emotional resilience. Our findings support existing research indicating that effective emotion regulation and social support help students manage homesickness while maintaining academic consistency. Preparing students for independent living requires structured emotional support, healthy outlets for self-expression, and open family communication to help them balance attachment needs with autonomy development before facing extended separation.

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