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- 1 "Why do they fail? A qualitative follow up study of 1000 recruits to the British Army Infantry to
- 2 understand high levels of attrition"
- 3

## Abstract

### Background

The British Army has over 100 career employment groups to which recruits may apply. The Infantry is one of these career employment groups; it accounts for 25% of the overall strength. It is of concern that Infantry recruit attrition within the first 12 weeks of training remains consistently above 30%. Poor selection methods that lead to the enlistment of unsuitable recruits have negative financial and personal consequences, but little is known about the personal experiences of those who fail

### Objective

The aim of this research was to understand why infantry recruits choose to leave and explore the personal experiences of those that fail.

### Methods

This study draws on qualitative data from the second phase of a larger mixed method study. The foci of this paper are the findings directly related to the responses of recruits in exit interviews and their Commanding Officers' training reports. An exploratory qualitative, inductive method was used to generate insights, explanations and potential solutions to training attrition.

### Results

What the data describes is a journey of extreme situational demands that the recruits experience throughout their transition from civilian life to service in the British Infantry. It is the cumulative

27 effect of the stressors, combined with the recruit being dislocated from their established support  
28 network, which appears to be the catalyst for failure among recruits.

29

### 30 **Conclusion**

31 There are clearly defined areas where either further research or changes to current practice may  
32 provide a better understanding of, and ultimately reduce, the current attrition rates experienced by  
33 the Infantry Training Centre.

34

35 *Keywords:* Work place stress, Work Environment, Recruitment, Qualitative Analysis,  
36 British Army, military, training attrition,

37

38 **1. Introduction**

39           The British Army has over 100 career employment groups to which recruits may apply.  
40 The Infantry is one of these career employment groups; it accounts for nearly a quarter of the  
41 overall strength of the British Army and, in the financial year ending 2013, 5380 recruits passed  
42 out of the Infantry Training Centre and joined the infantry regiments of the British Army (1). It  
43 is of concern that infantry recruit attrition within the first 12 weeks of training remains  
44 consistently above 30% (2). Nearly three quarters of this attrition is attributed to psychological,  
45 personnel and disciplinary reasons rather than physical failure (2). As Borman et al., (3) argue,  
46 poor selection methods that lead to the enlistment of unsuitable recruits have negative financial  
47 and personal consequences, but little is known about the personal experiences of those who fail.  
48 This research aimed to understand reasons why recruits fail, or choose to leave, so that informed  
49 approaches can be taken to address these consistent high rates of attrition.

50  
51           Organisations are social entities with distinctive and enduring characteristics (Albert et al.  
52 (4). Membership of particular organisations, modulated by the extent to which the organisation's  
53 'cognitive structures' (5) are embraced, constitutes a specific part of an individual's social  
54 identity known as their 'organisational identity'. Military organisations are distinctive due to the  
55 totality of their nature and their specific induction programmes. Ashforth and Mael (6) identify  
56 from Fisher's (7) and Goffman's (8) work on total and quasi-total institutions, the potential  
57 difficulties and psychological conflict organisational newcomers might experience when adapting  
58 to a new organisation such as the military. Unlike a job in civilian society (such as a  
59 supermarket) the military adopt induction behaviours to encourage the newcomer to feel as if  
60 they belong, and to separate them from their previous life. So, for example, on arrival at basic

61 training symbols of the recruit's previous identity are removed, their hair is cut, their clothes  
62 removed and codes of dress and behaviour are imposed. These are all methods of encouraging  
63 the individual to adapt to their new environment and encourage internalisation of the  
64 organisation's goals and values. The process provides the individual with the initial trappings of  
65 an identity consistent with the organisation's expectations. However, during this transitional  
66 period the individual's pre-existing beliefs and attitudes are challenged which causes varying  
67 degrees of cognitive discomfort as the individual prioritises the military identity within the  
68 hierarchy of their social identity. The impact on the individual's social identity can be both  
69 positive and negative.

70  
71 Studies undertaken in Israel explore the impact of compulsory military service on the  
72 development of an individual's social and individual identity. Bleich and Levy et al (9) argue  
73 that a crisis in identity occurs when young Israelis are conscripted into the army. Hampson (10)  
74 identified what training staff referred to as 'culture-shock' in recruits who were unable to manage  
75 the expectations of their new surroundings and withdrew from training. Hale (11) argues that  
76 recruits make a transition from belonging to a civilian culture only, to also being a member of a  
77 military one, and that on enlistment recruits experience a 'rupture' as everything that was certain  
78 and familiar for the individual becomes uncertain and unfamiliar and the rupture (the name given  
79 to the period of transition to military life) plays a pivotal role in how the individual constructs  
80 their military identity.

81  
82 The highest rate of newcomer attrition occurs within the first 12 weeks of training (Army  
83 Recruitment and Training Division, 2) as recruits attempt to adjust to the physical reality of

84 military life (5, 11), adapting their social identity to achieve acceptance and belonging. However,  
85 questions remain as to why recruits choose to reject the military after expending so much time  
86 and energy to join. The main focus of previous British studies into this early drop-out has been  
87 centred around predicting attrition based on service wide assumptions on why recruits leave e.g.  
88 homesickness, physical failure, injury etc. (10-16). This study argues that the identities and  
89 cultures of different career employment groups within the services are distinctive, and corps such  
90 as the Royal Army Medical Corps (RAMC) can see an attrition rate of as little as 5% (2). It is  
91 argued that soldiers entering the RAMC have a very different lived experience to those  
92 undertaking training in the infantry and, as such, the unique experience of the infantry recruit  
93 who withdraws from training has to be studied to truly understand the exceptionally high failure  
94 rate found in this career employment group.

95

## 96 **2. Aim**

97

98         The aim of this study was to explore the reasons given by recruits who failed to complete  
99 infantry training in order to gain an understanding of the process they go through: their journey to  
100 leaving, with a particular emphasis on the factors to which they attribute failure and the impact  
101 that these have on the individual.

102

103

104 **3. Methods**

105 *3.1 Design*

106 This paper draws on qualitative data from the second phase of a larger mixed method  
107 study. The first phase of the mixed method study was a survey design which provided a wide  
108 range of biographical data on recruits. The foci of this paper are the findings directly related to  
109 the responses of recruits in exit interviews and their Commanding Officers' training report when  
110 they failed to complete infantry training.

111

112 *3.2 Setting, Sample and Recruitment*

113 The study was conducted at the British Army Infantry Training Centre. It was undertaken  
114 over a period of six months with 1000 infantry recruits who volunteered to have their training  
115 progression monitored. When a recruit left training, for any reason, they were invited to take part  
116 in an interview.

117 The recruitment process began with an introduction to the study to all potential study  
118 recruits in the absence of training staff. This outlined the purpose of the study, what was involved  
119 in taking part, and aimed to reduce the pressure on the volunteers so they did not feel coerced into  
120 participation. The initial presentation covered the aims of the study, consent and assurance of  
121 confidentiality regarding data collected. All potential recruits were provided with an information  
122 sheet outlining the purpose and nature of the study and were then given four hours to consider  
123 participation. Recruits had to actively return to the medical centre if they wished to participate in  
124 the study.

125



126 *3.3 Data Collection*

127           Study recruits who agreed to participate were interviewed within 48 hours of  
128 making the decision to leave or being notified that their training was being discontinued (i.e.  
129 they were being dismissed from the Army). Interviews were undertaken with recruits who  
130 discontinued within the first five weeks of training, since previous studies on recruit attrition  
131 within the British Army demonstrate that this is the period of highest attrition (10, 11, 16). Once  
132 recruits commence infantry training they have to serve a minimum of 28 days before they can  
133 apply to leave. Recruits can be dismissed from service within that 28 day period if they breach  
134 discipline, have medical problems or are deemed unsuitable for service in the army by the  
135 training staff. One hundred recruits were interviewed over a 6 month period as they left training.

136  
137           A semi-structured interview template was developed from discussions with training staff  
138 and previous studies into training attrition within the British Army (10, 16). Interviews were  
139 designed to allow the individual to express their own reasons for leaving above and beyond those  
140 expressed to their Commanding Officer in their training report leaving interviews. The aim being  
141 that the recruit was invited to tell their own story within a framework of questions (see figure 1).  
142 When developing the interview template training staff, who agreed to be interviewed in the pilot  
143 study, described recruits who failed to complete training as usually being very unhappy. To  
144 gauge the mood of all the recruits that failed to complete training a modified Subjective Units of  
145 Disturbance (SUD) scale was used. Subjective units of disturbance is a widely accepted tool in  
146 getting participants to rate, on a scale of 0-10, how disturbed a given situation has made them feel  
147 (17). Participants were asked to rate their mood on a scale of 0-10, 0 being the saddest that they  
148 had ever felt and 10 being their normal mood.

149 In addition to interviews with recruits, the training leaving reports written by the recruits'  
150 Commanding Officers were analysed. Previous studies by Hampson (10) and Sirett (16) report  
151 reasons for why recruits leave training; however, during the pilot study the accuracy of the  
152 training report was brought into question, as training staff suggested that recruits told their  
153 Commanding Officer “what he wanted to hear”. If this phenomenon was occurring it was  
154 important to understand why. It was felt that an important part of the study was to compare the  
155 interview transcripts and the training reports in order to better understand the reasons for failure.

156

157 Once all interviews had been completed, the interview transcripts were purposively  
158 sampled to maximise variation and include a wide selection of recruits. British Army infantry  
159 regiments recruit from certain areas of the UK so, for example, each training intake might consist  
160 of recruits from Liverpool or Manchester. This method ensured that the sample analysed reflected  
161 the recruit population across the United Kingdom and not those from just one geographical area.  
162 The interview transcripts were sampled until theoretical saturation had been achieved.  
163 Theoretical saturation suggests that not only has the data achieved descriptive saturation, but also  
164 the analysis describes how the various codes, categories and concepts interconnect (18).

165

### 166 *3.4 Analysis*

167 The aim of this study was to explore the reasons given by those recruits who failed to complete  
168 infantry training in order to gain an understanding of the process they go through. Given its clear  
169 focus and application, framework analysis, an applied research methodology, was selected.  
170 Although developed as an applied policy research methodology (19), framework analysis  
171 facilitates systematic analysis of data and helps to achieve specified aims and outputs (20). It was

172 chosen for this study because it has the capacity to handle data from a large number of subjects in  
173 a rigorous, transparent and logical process of textual analysis. One of the key benefits of the  
174 framework approach is its transparency. The ability to trace all interpretations back to the textual  
175 source through the index system coupled with the systematic approach to data reduction adds a  
176 high degree of trustworthiness and reliability to the findings.

177

178           The study gained full ethical and scientific approval from Defence Medical Services  
179 Clinical Research Committee and has been assigned the unique project number 082.

180

181

182 **4. Results**

183

184 The results are reported in the following sections under three main headings: Population  
185 Demographics, Institutional Demands and Individual Demands. A sample of the demographic  
186 data, taken from the overarching survey study, is included to give a feel for the recruit population  
187 and the overall outcome of the 1000 recruits that entered training and were being monitored. The  
188 main findings of this paper are from data collected from both the interview transcripts and the  
189 training leaving reports written by the recruits' Commanding Officer.

190

191 Population Demographics

192 The study population was male with a mean age of 20.0 years and an age range of 17.2  
193 years to 27.4 years. The ethnic mix was predominately white British (95.6%, n=853) with only  
194 25 (2.8%) recruits recording themselves as Black British. The category labelled 'other' consisted  
195 of 11 recruits who recorded their ethnicity as Indian (n=2), Pakistani (n=1), Chinese (n=1) and  
196 mixed race (n=7).

197

198 Within the study population, 11.3% (n=112) did not know their father. However 84.3%  
199 (n=834) came from homes where their father was in employment, with only 4.4% (n=43) of  
200 fathers having not worked. The majority of the sample (53.1%, n=517) achieved GCSE results of  
201 grade C or below, with only 14.8% achieving grade B or above in all subjects. Notable was that  
202 over half of all respondents (53.3%, n=533) reported being in trouble with the police prior to

203 enlistment. Certain drugs was common amongst the recruits with just over a third, (32.4%,  
204 n=324) of them having used cannabis in the year prior to joining the Army.

205  
206 From the study population being observed 36% (n=362) left infantry training. Within this  
207 group 59.4% (n=215) left at their own request and 13.9% (n=50) were dismissed as Service No  
208 Longer Required or were deemed Unsuitable for Army Service (see Table 1). Of those who did  
209 not complete Infantry Training (n=362) 4.4% (n=16) went on to transfer to other branches or  
210 career employment groups within the Army. Figure 2 explains the discharge categories. Of the  
211 362 recruits who failed to complete infantry training, 27% (n=100) volunteered to be  
212 interviewed. Through purposive sampling of those transcripts (this included both the interview  
213 transcripts and the Commanding Officer's leaving report) theoretical saturation was achieved  
214 with 32 transcripts.

215

## 216 Institutional Demands

### 217 *4.1. Coping*

218 The recruits' ability or inability to cope with the situational stressors or demands of the  
219 enlistment journey is fundamental to their success or failure to complete training. The impact of  
220 those demands was not linear; they appeared to have a cyclical action on each other, leading to a  
221 helix effect as each demand in turn challenged the recruit's ability to cope.

222

223 This association is most prominent in the data when observing the effect that performance  
224 and mood appear to have upon each other. By looking at the response of the recruits, and

225 comparing them with their Commanding Officer's assessments, it is possible to distinguish a  
226 cycle of behavioural decline taking place (Figure 3).

227

228 Figure 3 demonstrates the typical pattern observed as the recruit began to fail in training.  
229 The data suggested that as a recruit's mood declined so did his training performance, which in  
230 turn made him question his reasons for being there. There was no clear starting point for this  
231 decline, because it appeared that the institutional and individual stressors subtly started the cycle  
232 as each stressor eroded the individual's ability to cope. The stressors built up to a point when the  
233 individual could no longer cope with how they were feeling. The point at which this level was  
234 reached was clearly different in each individual, as demonstrated by the timings when recruits left  
235 (some after four weeks, some after four months). What was clear was that self-doubt began to  
236 creep in and impacted on both mood and performance. The outcome of this cyclic process was  
237 that the recruit made the conscious decision that the Army was not for him (or alternatively that  
238 he did not belong there or fit in).

239

240 Each recruit had a unique reason for leaving. It was clear that although isolated stressors  
241 were perceived to be manageable, multiple stressors, combined with the recruit being away from  
242 their normal social support network led to an inability to cope. The psychological and physical  
243 combination resulted in the situation becoming overwhelming:

244

245 *'I found the training very hard; I was always playing catch up..'*

246 Recruit 4 (Discharge as of Right)

247

248 *'I don't like being away from home for long periods....I feel homesick....I miss my son..'*

249 Recruit 11 (Discharge as of Right)

250

251

252 *'I find the training and discipline hard....I am in trouble most days...I make lots of mistakes and*

253 *the platoon gets beasted'*

254 Recruit 15 (Discharge as of Right)

255

256 If extracts from the Commanding Officer's reports are examined for Recruits 4 and 15 it  
257 is possible to detect that not only did their ability to cope decline and their mood deteriorate, but  
258 their ability to perform and achieve the most basic demands of training declined to such an extent  
259 that if they had not decided to leave then that decision would have been made for them:

260

261 *'...has failed to adapt to Army life....presented himself to the medical centre daily from week one*  
262 *with a range of ailments....I suspected there was nothing wrong...just avoiding training'*

263 Commanding Officer of Recruit 4 (Discharge as of Right)

264

265 *'...has irritated instructors and peers to such an extent that he has been removed from training*  
266 *and supervised in Head Quarters.....training that he did complete was poor with no*  
267 *determination to succeed no chance of him ever passing basic...should not be allowed to re-*  
268 *enlist'*

269 Commanding Officer of Recruit 15 (Discharge as of Right)

270

271 As Recruit 15 described, his performance began to deteriorate which caused him to get  
272 the whole platoon punished for his mistakes. His peers then ostracised him as they very quickly  
273 became irritated by his inability to keep up with training. This resulted in him questioning his  
274 compatibility with the infantry, which led to him being further ostracised. Ultimately he made the  
275 conscious decision that he did not belong, and this appears to be the point at which all attempts to  
276 cope ceased and Recruit 15 gave up. This pattern is typical: once a recruit reaches the point  
277 where they decide that they no longer can cope then the cycle of decline, Figure 5, becomes  
278 terminal.

279

#### 280 *4.2. Fitting In*

281 The sense of not ‘fitting-in’ was one reason given for not coping, the end result of not  
282 coping or an amalgam of all factors relating to coping. The concept of ‘fitting-in’ was a  
283 consistent theme throughout all the interviews. Interestingly, ‘not fitting in’ was not isolated to  
284 those recruits that chose to leave, but was also expressed by those that were dismissed or deemed  
285 unsuitable for army service. This would suggest that a sense of ‘not fitting in’ was a common  
286 belief in those that failed to complete the course. What is clear is that once recruits decided that  
287 they no longer fitted in, leaving was inevitable. What was apparent was that there was very rarely  
288 any singular reason for why the recruit believed that they did not fit-in. Rather, it was a complex  
289 framework of personal beliefs and thoughts stimulated by the multiple stressors that they have  
290 been exposed to. It was the complex collection of thoughts and beliefs behind the decision to  
291 leave that was of primary interest. They provide the understanding and evidence of commonality  
292 of thought process in most of the recruits that left training, most notably the belief, for whatever  
293 reason, that they did not fit into life in the Army.



294

295 *'I do not fit in with army culture; I find it too mentally demanding.....I have tried to get on with*  
296 *it..'*

297 Recruit 1 (Discharge as of Right)

298 *'I don't like it.....I don't enjoy the work....I don't fit into the lifestyle....I have let my family down*  
299 *by leaving but I feel I rushed my decision to join.'*

300 Recruit 5 (Discharge as of Right)

301 *'this was a big mistake; I do not fit into the 24 hour life style – 24 hour job. I find other recruits*  
302 *immature.'*

303 Recruit 7 (Discharge as of Right)

304

305

306 *'army life is not for me, I don't like it....I was not ready for it...it was harder than I thought.'*

307 Recruit 12 (Discharge as of Right)

308

309

310 *'I don't like the way that they speak to me.....I don't fit into army life, I have made friends but*  
311 *I don't like the culture here.'*

312 Recruit 13 (Discharge as of Right)

313

314

315 Recruit 4 found the training hard and felt that he was always physically playing catch up.

316 A point came when he began to feel that he did not fit in and became increasingly homesick,

317 wanting to return to his family. Ultimately he requested to Discharge as of Right. His Company  
318 Commander however made the following observations:

319  
320 *'he was very homesick.....failed to adapt to Army life...he has the capability to pass but would*  
321 *need to show far more commitment'*

322 Commanding Officer Recruit 4 (Discharge as of Right)

323

#### 324 *4.3. Physical & Cultural Demands*

325 The recruits' response to the situation in which they found themselves combined with the  
326 way in which they thought about that situation and how they tried to cope with it became  
327 important factors within the data. All the study recruits were exposed to similar situational and  
328 environmental stressors; however each recruit reacted differently to the situation that they found  
329 themselves in as they tried to make sense of what was happening to them. It appeared that the  
330 recruits who failed had difficulty in understanding or comprehending why they were being  
331 subjected to certain rules and expectations. For example, recruit 6 could not understand why  
332 discipline was so hard and why this experience was so different to what he had experienced in the  
333 Army Cadets.

334

335 *'I don't like the army.....I don't like the hardness of the physical training.....far more*  
336 *disciplined than the Army Cadets'*

337 Recruit 6 (Discharged as of Right)

338

339           The psychological impact of activities such as physical training appeared to erode the  
340 recruits' resolve to continue. At the point where they could no longer find any relevance in their  
341 own mind for the tasks they were being asked to perform, the situation became overwhelming  
342 very quickly.

343  
344           Initial training is partly about ensuring that unsuitable candidates, who would not cope  
345 with the Infantry role, are excluded at an early stage. There are always going to be recruits who  
346 could never meet the physical demands as they were unsuitable for Army services from the  
347 outset. Recruit 9 is a good example of this, as his Commanding Officer's reports suggest that he  
348 lacked the emotional maturity and robustness to make the transition to Army life and succeed in  
349 training. Recruit 9 clearly made a distinct adverse impression on his Commanding Officer:

350  
351           *'I miss my girlfriend .....my freedom...I am too young for this life at the moment'*

352 Recruit 9 (Unsuitable for Army Service)

353  
354           *'he is severely depressed and cannot handle the regime within the training establishment.....he*  
355 *is not physically or mentally strong enough for the Army and should not be allowed to re-join as*  
356 *he is not suited in any shape or form'*

357 Commanding Officer Recruit 9 (Unsuitable for Army Service)

358  
359           The concept of freedom and the loss of it were very prominent amongst the institutional  
360 factors. This restriction of movement and an inability to come and go when they pleased had a

361 detrimental effect on those that were clearly used to being in control of their own daily routine  
362 and movements.

363  
364 *'I want to be my own person; I don't want to be told what to do all the time....I don't like the lack*  
365 *of privacy'*

366 Recruit 7 (Discharge as of Right)

367  
368 *'I hate being confined in the barracks and the people I have to mix with....the Army has*  
369 *prevented me from making friends as we are always in competition with each other' 'I don't fit*  
370 *in here, the sacrifices are too great....the training is bullshit....the blokes are idiots who I would*  
371 *never associate with outside of here'*

372 Recruit 30 (Discharge as of Right)

373  
374 *'I am finding the communal living and the loss of freedom difficult.....it's difficult to be around*  
375 *younger recruits who mess around a lot and cause trouble'*

376 Recruit 27 (Services no Longer Required)

377  
378 These responses convey the variety of meanings attached to the loss of freedom. Some  
379 recruits focused on the lack of privacy and the communal living, others found the restrictions on  
380 their time and free movement the hardest part. They expressed that not being able to walk out of  
381 the camp to the shops or make phone call when they wanted to an extremely restrictive  
382 environment to live in. What is most interesting is that all these reasons seem to be over-arched  
383 by the question of what the recruit's expectation of life in basic training was. It is evident that

384 amongst the recruits who failed there was a either a nostalgic view or little comprehension of  
385 what to expect on enlistment. Recruit 6 reflects on the discipline and his experiences in the Army  
386 Cadets and is genuinely surprised that he finds it too hard; he also finds it difficult to understand  
387 why enlistment in the regular Army is so different. Recruit 9 reflects on his experiences in the  
388 Territorial Army:

389  
390  
391 *'I feel trapped....I have lost my freedom.... The Army is always on my mind, the discipline is too*  
392 *hard.....far more discipline than the Army Cadets'*

393 Recruit 6 (Discharge as of Right)

394  
395 *'I used to be full time in the Territorial Army.....this is very different here.....we get picked on*  
396 *for other's mistakes.....I feel I am more experienced than a lot of the people here'.*

397  
398 Recruit 9 (Unsuitable for Army Service)

399  
400  
401 It is evident that Recruit 9 had created an image of what training was in his own mind,  
402 and in that image the instructor recognised his experience and maybe set him above his peers. In  
403 reality he was treated no differently from his peers and had great difficulty comprehending this  
404 perceived injustice, which eventually led to him leaving.

405

406           When recruits talk about the lack of privacy, the confinement in the establishment, or the  
407 difficulty getting along with peers in such close proximity, they appear to have failed to  
408 anticipate or prepare for the environment that they were going to live in. They seem to have had  
409 no idea what to expect. When confronted with the environmental reality of what life in a training  
410 barracks entailed they were unable to adapt and cope, Recruit 16 is an example of the results of  
411 those stressors when they become overwhelming:

412  
413   *‘ I do not want to be in the army, I find it too hard and would rather not do it.....my parents want*  
414 *me to stay.....they feel I am letting myself down... let them down. I have thought of harming*  
415 *myself but I know it is wrong, I just need to leave now’*

416 Recruit 16 (Discharge as of Right)

417

## 418 Individual Demands

419

### 420 *4.4. Emotional Demands*

421           The lasting impact that the situational stressors had on the recruits’ mood was an  
422 unexpected finding. Subjective Units of Disorder (SUD, (17)) scores were recorded for each  
423 recruit interviewed, firstly at the point that they were thinking about leaving and secondly when  
424 they knew they could go. Prior to making the decision to leave, the mean SUD score was 3.8  
425 (SD = 2.5) for the 32 transcripts analysed (one recruit refused to give a score). This score was  
426 not unexpected as recruits had been in a stressful environment, which on the whole they probably  
427 did not enjoy. What was unexpected was that in just under half of those interviewed (n=16) the  
428 mood score remained below eight even though they had been removed from training and knew

429 that they were returning home. In seven of the cases the mood score failed to recover to above  
430 five. The recruits made the following comments:

431  
432 *'I find the training hard....discipline hard....I am in trouble most days for making mistakes and*  
433 *then the whole platoon gets punished....I don't fit in.....I have been crying myself to*  
434 *sleep at night..'* (SUD score 5/10 on leaving)

435 Recruit 15 (Discharge as of Right)

436  
437           These findings suggest that in just under half of those interviewed (n=16) the  
438 experience of training and failure has an impact on their mood which is not automatically  
439 alleviated by removing them from a stressful situation. In just under a quarter of those  
440 interviewed (n=7) the impact on the mood is arguably moderate to severe, as their mood does not  
441 recover above five prior to leaving.

442  
443           Homesickness was reported in just under half of those interviewed (n=15) but was never  
444 given as the primary cause for leaving. Homesickness was always presented as an aside to other  
445 reasons and was in most cases related to missing parents and girlfriends. This raises the question  
446 as to whether the individual was missing the physical environment of home, or more probably the  
447 support and companionship of those at home. This appears to corroborate with the textual data,  
448 as in all the interviews undertaken the recruits who stated that they were homesick would provide  
449 a primary reason for leaving first before saying that they were homesick, e.g. Recruit 12 is  
450 finding training hard and has decided to leave, giving the following reason:

451

452 *'army life is not for me.....I don't like it...not ready for it.....harder than I thought'*

453 He then goes on to say:

454

455 *'I miss my friends and family'*

456 Recruit 12 (Discharge as of Right)

457

458 This suggests that as the recruit begins to have difficulty in training and finds it harder to  
459 cope he begins to become homesick for his usual social support network. Prior to enlistment this  
460 would have been the friends and family that he would turn to in times of difficulty; however on  
461 enlistment he leaves them behind. Therefore it appears that homesickness is a general word used  
462 to cover many things, but what it actually means in this study is that the recruit is missing his  
463 social support network at a time when struggling to cope with training.

464

465 The stress of family problems is not unlike homesickness. In all of the cases where  
466 family problems were cited as a reason for leaving (n=6), they were accompanied by other  
467 institutional reasons for not continuing. Family problems may have been used as an acceptable  
468 reason for leaving instead of the admission of failure. Recruit 27 is a good example of this  
469 phenomenon:

470

471 *'I prefer to be nearer home to support my family'*

472 Recruit 27 (Service No Longer Required)

473



474 Recruits 27's story is interesting as it supports the anecdotal evidence which was  
475 collected in the planning of the study suggesting that recruits looked to giving legitimate reasons  
476 to their Commanding Officers and peers for leaving. The recruits story suggests that he decided  
477 that he needed to be nearer home to support his family and that he found the younger recruits  
478 hard to live with as they messed around a lot and caused trouble. There is no acknowledgement  
479 in his account that he behaved in a way that was unacceptable. His Commanding Officer's report  
480 provides a very different account:

481  
482 *'adamant that he does not want to be in the Army and has adopted a completely negative attitude*  
483 *towards the training regime.....should be discharged Unfit for Army Service and should not be*  
484 *allowed to re-enlist'*

485 Commanding Officer Recruit 27

486  
487 In his interview, Recruit 27 created a picture of the Army not being for him and his need  
488 to be with his family. In his Commanding Officer's opinion, his behaviour was so disruptive he  
489 was discharged on the basis of 'Services No Longer Required', which equates to a dismissal from  
490 employment on discipline grounds. Of the six cases where family problems were cited as the  
491 reason for leaving only one case was corroborated by the Commanding Officer. It would appear  
492 recruits were creating institutionally acceptable reasons as to why they had to leave when in  
493 reality they were struggling to cope in the same way as their peers. In addition to this there was  
494 some suggestion by Commanding Officers that some individuals were also manufacturing their  
495 own discharge by deliberately behaving in a way that would get them dismissed.

496 *4.5. Summary of Findings*

497           What the data describes is a journey of extreme situational demands that recruits  
498 experience throughout their transition from civilian life to service in the British Infantry. Figure 4  
499 demonstrates how the framework process was used to transparently and systematically reduce the  
500 data from emergent themes to generate mapped outcomes. The narratives of the failed recruits  
501 suggested that enlistment into the Army Infantry was a journey, and during that journey they had  
502 to cope and adapt psychologically and physically to fit into their new surroundings. What was  
503 also clear was that during the journey or transitional process they had to cope with multiple  
504 demands. Those demands were situational stressors of an institutional or individual nature (see  
505 Figure 5) and their cumulative effect appeared to erode the recruit's ability to cope with training.  
506 Figure 5 illustrates two points: (1) it appears that it is the psychological response to the situational  
507 stressors that causes failure, and (2) it rarely appears to be a single situational stressor in isolation  
508 that impacts on the individual, but multiple stressors that have a cumulative effect. The recruit  
509 reaches a point where they feel that they can no longer cope. It is at this point that they seem to  
510 make the decision that they no longer belong or (as described by many recruits) they feel they no  
511 longer 'fit-in'.

512           It is the cumulative effect of the situational stressors, combined with the recruit being  
513 dislocated from their established support network, which appears to be the catalyst for failure  
514 amongst recruits. To succeed in training, the findings suggest that the recruits must possess the  
515 psychological and physical capability to face the challenges and stressors related to enlistment.  
516 The recruit begins the journey of enlistment full of motivation to succeed; they enter training  
517 where a single or numerous stressors have an impact on them, which triggers a cycle of decline  
518 both in mood and performance. Finally they feel unable to stay any longer as they believe that

519 they do not belong and become de-motivated and exit service (Figure 6). Figure 6 identifies three  
520 phases on the journey to failure; the coping phase, the difficulty in coping phase and the not  
521 coping phase. This structural view is important as it identifies key gates within the process of  
522 recruit failure where recruits could possibly be helped to succeed rather than fail in their training.

523  
524         Once the ‘not coping’ stage is reached, the recruit appears to have entered a journey of no  
525 return and exit appears to be the only solution. They did not fail as a direct result of the demands,  
526 but as a result of how the demands made them feel. Once the stress of the demands became too  
527 much, it triggered a sequence of thought processes that led into an irreversible cycle of events and  
528 ultimately training failure. All leavers, both those who chose to leave and those whose services  
529 were no longer required, discussed a pivotal point in their recruit journey when they made the  
530 conscious decision that they did not ‘fit-in’ to the culture and environment of the military. It  
531 appears that once this belief had been adopted it became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Performance  
532 was observed to deteriorate and the recruit reported a subjective lowering of mood, which in turn  
533 compounded the belief that they did not belong and subsequently alienated them from their peers.  
534 The data suggests that once the recruit goes into the cycle of decline (Figure 5) it appears to be  
535 irreversible.

536  
537

538 **5. Discussion**

539  
540           Joining the British Army requires a great deal of perseverance and commitment. It is of  
541 concern that a third of the recruit population in this study were unable to complete infantry  
542 training and that just under half of those that left chose to leave voluntarily. The data suggests  
543 that the infantry forms a society of its own, with its own very distinct identity. The norms and  
544 values appear to challenge some recruits' established beliefs, creating psychological turmoil to  
545 such an extent that to achieve relief from that turmoil they leave.

546  
547           British society has changed a lot since the wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century; few civilians have  
548 experience of war apart from what they see in the media. As a society it can be argued that  
549 although the United Kingdom has been the victim of terrorist threats for many decades, as a  
550 nation it has not been under a global threat (nuclear annihilation, invasion threat etc.) since the  
551 end of the cold war, and that our society has adapted accordingly. Potentially, the military culture  
552 and expectations bear less and less resemblance to the society which it serves (21). The values,  
553 beliefs and attitudes of the infantry identity are so different from those of the infantry recruit's  
554 social and personal identity that an immense psychological demand is placed on the recruit  
555 during the transition into the Infantry. The data suggests the recruit has to re-categorise their  
556 social identity (22, 23), in order to incorporate a new military identity. The recruit's social  
557 identity is very fragile during this period as they re-establishes the hierarchy of their social  
558 categories based on their sense of belonging to the new social group (24, 25). If the recruit is  
559 unable to define himself as a member of this social group, then he becomes at risk of failing. It  
560 appears that the differences between these identities form the catalyst for attrition in infantry  
561 training. Societal identity has become so detached from military identity that the gap between the

562 two worlds is vast, the chasm between them being too great for one third of the population  
563 observed in this study to cross.

564

#### 565 *4.1. Coping*

566 Jenkins' (25) theory of social identity suggests that coping is a learnt strategy that human  
567 beings develop from exposure to their social surroundings. Individually, we learn behaviour and  
568 how to cope by observing the behaviour of others (26). The findings within this study support the  
569 position of the established literature; that individuals in stressful situations do better if they have  
570 access to established social support mechanisms, (27), for example: assistance from others,  
571 affirmation of beliefs, sharing practices with the 'group', being liked by others and knowing a lot  
572 of people who all know each other (28). Prior to enlistment, individual recruits may have well  
573 established support mechanisms, but enlistment may strip away almost all the key components  
574 that would define social support. As a consequence of this it appears that if the individual does  
575 not have a robust and established concept of self to cope with separation from their support  
576 network on enlistment into the Army, they risk failure in training. Difficulty in coping instigated  
577 a sequence of self-doubt about their identity, which in turn undermined the recruit's confidence in  
578 their performance ability and their self-esteem. What was observed in effect was a self-fulfilling  
579 prophecy. The recruit began to believe that he did not belong which in turn affected his  
580 performance; this evoked poor feedback from the instructors which reinforced the recruits own  
581 thoughts of self-doubt. Very quickly the recruit moved from having difficulty in coping to not  
582 being able to cope with the situation in which he found himself.

583

584 *4.2. Expectation*

585  
586           It was evident amongst those recruits that failed to complete the infantry training course  
587 that the transition to military life was a greater challenge than they had expected. When met with  
588 the demands of basic training they were overwhelmed and believed themselves incapable of  
589 meeting the expectations placed upon them; subsequently, their commitment towards training  
590 appeared to wane. They failed to anticipate or prepare for the environment in which they were  
591 going to live and the physical realities of military life. They seemed to have had no  
592 understanding of what military culture and service entailed and failed to make sufficient social or  
593 emotional preparation. However, it must be acknowledged that poor preparation is not the fault  
594 of the recruit alone. It would be too easy to place the blame for false expectations on the recruit  
595 and for the organisation to avoid any reflection on their organisational practice. It is evident that  
596 the Army portrays a positive image, as it has a constant flow of willing volunteers to join.  
597 However, as identified by Tüzün and Cağlar (29) organisational trust is the bridge between  
598 organisational attractiveness and organisational identification and commitment, and if recruits are  
599 deceived with regards to their expectation of service life and infantry training, all trust will be lost  
600 when they are met with the reality of the organisation. When recruits spoke about how they had  
601 not anticipated the regime in training, they were verbalising the dissonance between expectations  
602 and reality. Arguably, this caused a breakdown of trust between the recruit and the Army with the  
603 recruit no longer being attracted to the organisation or willing to stay.

604  
605           The problem of recruits being misinformed about service life is not isolated to this study.  
606 Hampson (10) and Sirett (16) have previously identified that there was a mismatch between the  
607 expectations of recruits and the reality of training. Both Hampson (10) and Sirett (16) identified

608 that the initial demands of the first weeks of training were the major cause of discharge and their  
609 findings are consistent with the present study as regards the cumulative demands identified that  
610 are associated with failure.

611  
612         The finding that the recruit is most vulnerable to attrition when are in the transition  
613 period between cultures is not a new finding. Hampson (10) and Sirett (16) formed the same  
614 conclusions based on a broader Army population. However, to accept the above reason as a  
615 complete understanding for failure is to over simplify the problem. It places the blame for failure  
616 firmly with the recruit and does not reflect the role that the organisation plays in recruit failure.  
617 This study identifies the multiple situational demands that recruits are exposed to and also  
618 identifies the effect which it has on them, and the cognitive processes that are a result of them.  
619 Most importantly, it identifies when the recruit is most vulnerable to failure and how they make  
620 the decision to leave.

621

#### 622 *4.3. Enlistment process*

623  
624         The findings of this study has identified that among recruits who don't complete training  
625 there appear to be gateways through which recruits pass on a journey to failure, where they make  
626 the transition from coping to not coping. The findings suggest that once a recruit has entered the  
627 exit phase then there is little hope of recovery. Therefore, research and interventions at the exit  
628 phase would not be recommended as the financial cost of letting recruits progress that far into  
629 training with little chance of successful recovery would not make it cost effective. This leaves the  
630 enlistment phase and the training phase as potential stages for intervention. This identified  
631 training cost is a key factor when considering potential interventions during the enlistment phase.

632 The longer a recruit, who is ultimately going to fail, remains in training, the greater the cost of  
633 training failure overall both financially and personally. The goal is to achieve a balance between  
634 attaining minimal manpower wastage and maximising training success, thereby reducing the  
635 financial cost of training wastage overall.

636  
637 In order to better understand the recruits' journey into infantry training Figure 7 provides  
638 a diagrammatic picture of the enlistment journey. The point of entry into service (the point when  
639 they leave home and commence training at the Infantry Training Centre) is described by the  
640 recruits who failed and is illustrated here as vertical challenge, a cliff which they must climb.  
641 This vertical climb incorporates the demands of enlistment, and all of the demands which apply  
642 pressure to the recruits coping strategies.

643  
644 The dotted line in Figure 7 demonstrates a potential solution which could reduce the  
645 transitional impact that enlistment has on the recruit in the early stages of recruit training. This  
646 study has identified that at the point the recruit enters the Infantry Training Centre they are faced  
647 with overwhelming institutional and individual demands that they were clearly not prepared for,  
648 and these demands have an impact on their ability to cope with the dislocation from their  
649 established support networks (families and friends). They are placed in a restrictive environment,  
650 with little privacy, and with total strangers. It is argued that this has an irreversible impact on  
651 some recruits who very quickly, in the first days and weeks of training, realise that they have  
652 made a mistake and that they do not belong in the Army. Unfortunately, Army Regulations  
653 stipulate that they must remain in service for 28 days before they can leave. All the sample left



654 training within the first 6 weeks, and either left at the 28 day point by their own volition or were  
655 dismissed on the grounds of unsuitability or poor discipline.

656

657           It is therefore argued that it is the sudden impact of this transition from the family home  
658 into military training which is the catalyst for their ability to cope to be overwhelmed. Although  
659 their exit does not occur until many weeks later, it is argued that the journey to failure  
660 commences very soon after beginning infantry training.

661

662           A slower integration during the enlistment process, that is prior to commencement of  
663 residential training at the Infantry Training Centre, may be one way in which the impact of the  
664 transition to the military can be minimised. Figure 7 proposes that rather than presenting the  
665 recruit with a short, intense, overwhelming transition into training that risks high attrition, it  
666 would be better to introduce the recruit to the Army through a graduated transitional period  
667 during the enlistment phase. By having a series of acquaint visits or taster sessions at the training  
668 centre, potential recruits could develop a greater insight into what exactly training and life in the  
669 infantry entails and if managed correctly could throughout this period begin to develop  
670 friendships and support networks that they could carry through into the training phase. Most  
671 importantly, those recruits that decide that the Army Infantry was not for them could make the  
672 decision to withdraw during the enlistment phase and would not be trapped in the Army for a  
673 month before they could get out.

674

675

676 4.4. *Summary*

677  
678 In summary, there are clearly defined areas where either further research or changes to  
679 current practice may provide a better understanding of, and ultimately reduce, the current attrition  
680 rates experienced by the Infantry Training Centre. More openness and honesty by the Army  
681 during the recruitment process will allow potential recruits to make a more informed decision as  
682 to whether they are suited to the infantry role. In addition, more knowledge of the training and  
683 what is expected of them will help recruits to better prepare both physically and psychologically  
684 for training.

685  
686 The Army should consider approaching the problem of recruit attrition from two  
687 perspectives. First, they must reduce the number of recruits lost during the training process and  
688 second, reduce the financial cost of wastage. Though related, these are distinct objectives. The  
689 Army appears to accept that there will always be training wastage, however, this must be  
690 minimised by a more supportive and graduated transitional process, which will allow recruits  
691 who are unhappy to withdraw with immediate effect. It is argued that the transitional phase  
692 should be part of the enlistment process before a recruit commences the infantry training course.  
693 There has to be a distinction between the transitional period and the commencement of infantry  
694 training, as this would go some way to ensuring that only those who are motivated and accepting  
695 of military life enter the common infantry course. A graduated induction into service would  
696 potentially reduce the amount of attrition on the common infantry course and reduce the cost of  
697 wastage as recruits would leave during the transitional phase prior to commencement of training.  
698 More importantly, it would go some way to reducing the personal and psychological impact of  
699 training failure on those recruits that leave training.

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770

771 **Table 1: Training outcomes with reason for failure**  
 772

Outcome	n (%)
Passed	637 (63.8%)
Failed	362 (36.2%)
Discharge as of Right	170 (47%)
Services No Longer Required (discipline)	21 (5.8%)
Services No Longer Required (drugs)	2 (0.6%)
Released from Army Service	45 (12.4%)
Absent Without Leave (AWOL)	4 (1.1%)
Medical Discharge (physical)	58 (16%)
Transfer to Other Corps/Service	16 (4.4%)
Unsuitable for Army Service	27 (7.5%)
Unable to meet medical requirements of service	19 (5.2%)
<b>Total</b>	<b>362 (100%)</b>

773

774

775

776 **Figure 1: Semi Structured Interview Template**  
777

Figure 1: Semi Structured Interview Template
Why are you leaving?
How would you feel / what behaviour would you engage in if you could not leave?
How are you coping between making the decision / being told, to leave and now waiting to leave?
How is your mood at this point in time? What was the worst time? (SUD Scale of 1-10)
Did contact with your family whilst serving make things better or worse?
Could you suggest any changes or support that would enable you to stay in the army?

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779  
780

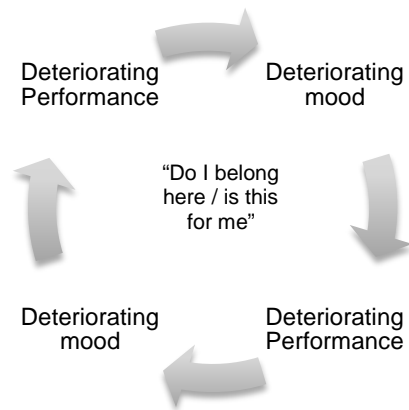
781 **Figure 2: Categorisation of reasons for discharge in training**

Reason	
Discharge As Of Right	The recruit can leave the Army after 28 days up until the end of his Phase 2 Training
Services No Longer Required	The Army Discharges the Recruit as a result of a breach of discipline
Released from Army Service	The Army releases the Recruit from service (usually used for very unhappy recruits and those found to be incompatible with military life). A release from service by mutual consent and no blame apportioned.
Absent Without Leave (AWOL)	Recruits that leave the training camp without permission are dismissed on the grounds of being absent without leave
Medical Discharge (physical)	The recruit develops an injury or illness that is not compatible with military service and they are discharged on medical grounds.
Transfer to Other Corps/Service	Recruits who are not happy or incompatible with infantry service but wish to remain in the army may transfer to another career employment group within the scope of their original GTI score.
Unsuitable for Army Service	The recruit is found to be unsuitable for Army service and is released from training.
Unable to meet medical requirements of service	The recruit is unable to meet the medical standards for continuation of training i.e. re-emergence of childhood asthma

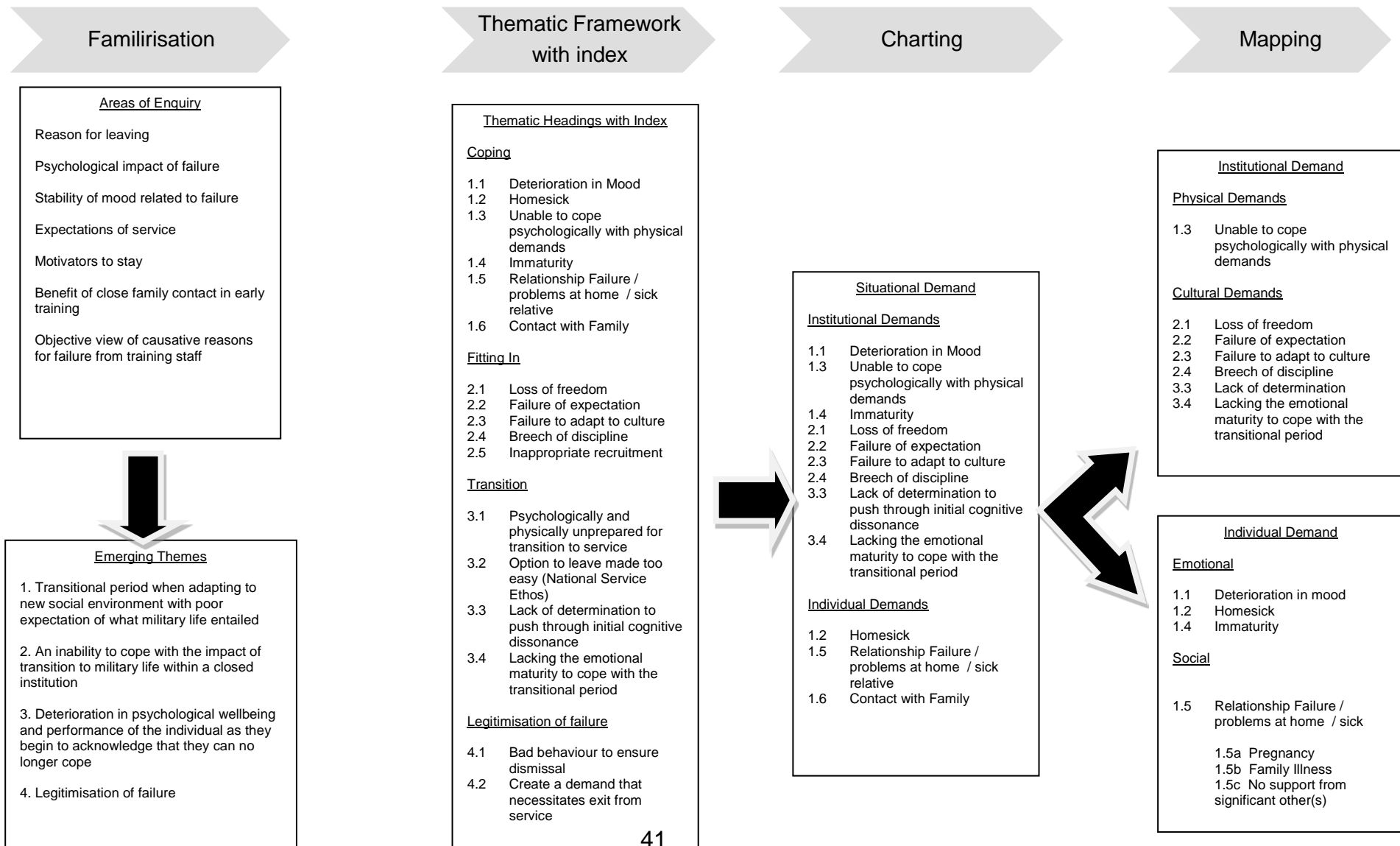
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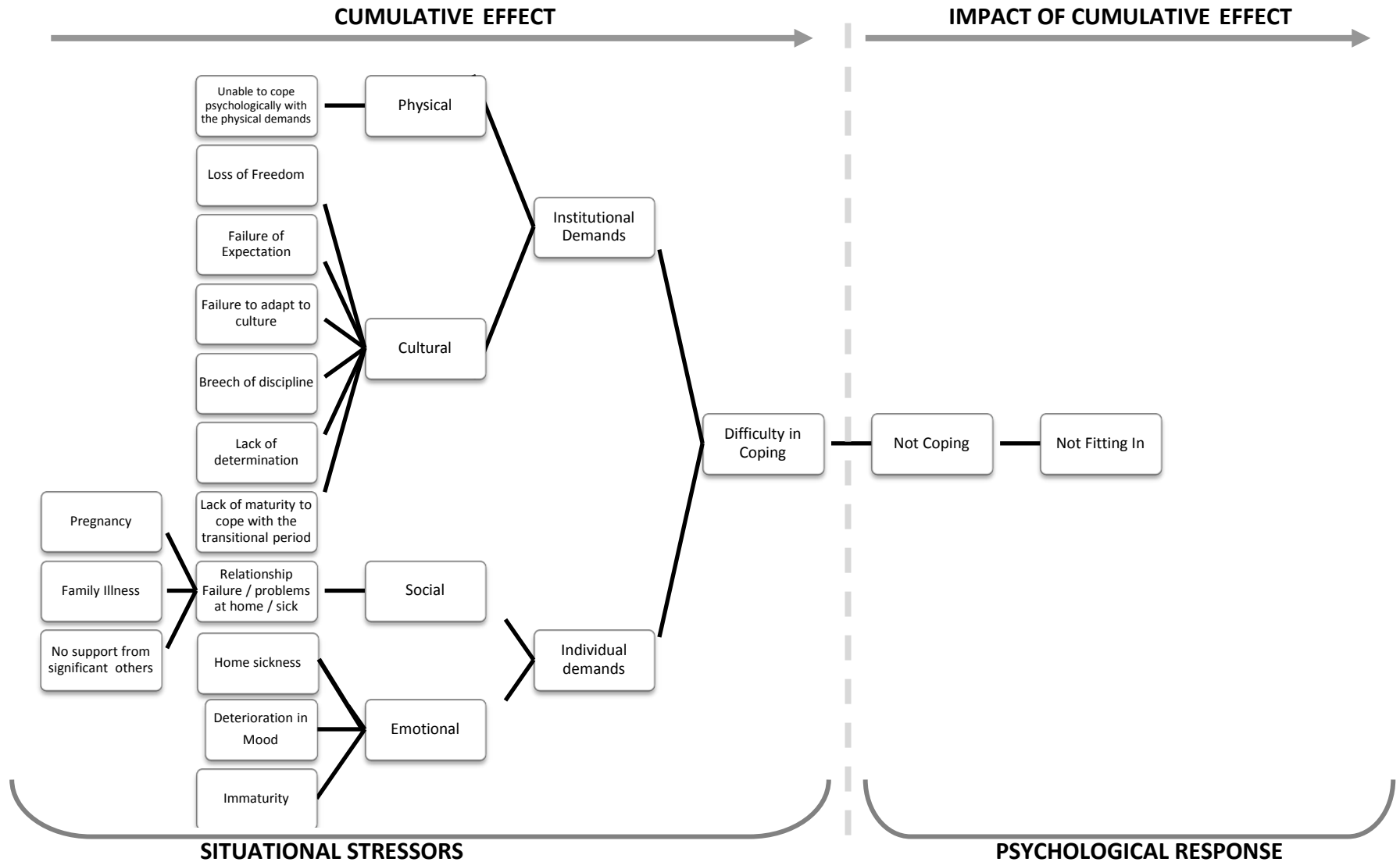
784 **Figure 3: Cycle of decline**  
785



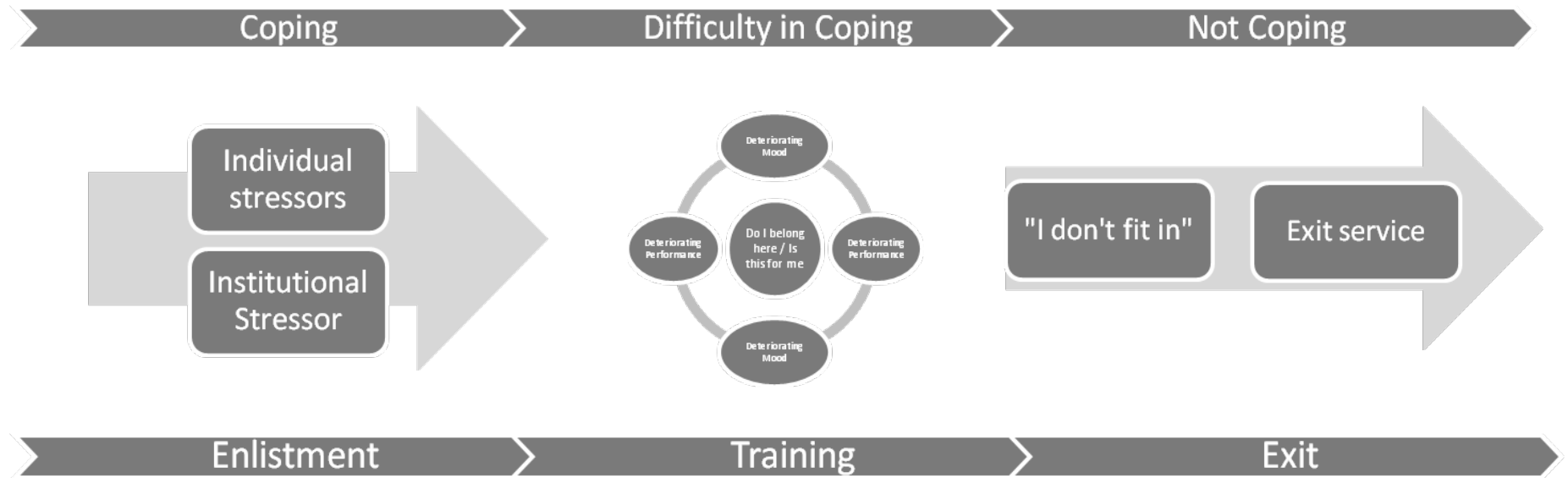
**Figure 4: Process of analysis: Mapping and Interpretation**



**Figure 5: Impact of multiple situational stressors on the recruit's ability to complete training**



**Figure 6: Journey to discharge**



**Figure 7: Enlistment journey**

