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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

1. Introduction

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 nearly a quarter of the overall strength of the British Army and, in the financial year ending 2013, 5380 recruits passed out of the Infantry Training Centre and joined the infantry regiments of the British Army (1). It is of concern that infantry recruit attrition within the first 12 weeks of training remains consistently above 30% (2). Nearly three quarters of this attrition is attributed to psychological, personnel and disciplinary reasons rather than physical failure (2). As Borman et al., (3) argue, 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. This research aimed to understand reasons why recruits fail, or choose to leave, so that informed approaches can be taken to address these consistent high rates of attrition.

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

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

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

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

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

2. Aim

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

3. Methods

3.1 Design

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

3.2 Setting, Sample and Recruitment

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

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

3.3 Data Collection

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

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

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

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

3.4 Analysis

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

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

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

4. Results

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

Population Demographics

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

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

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

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

Institutional Demands

4.1. Coping

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

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

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

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

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

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

Recruit 4 (Discharge as of Right)

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

Recruit 11 (Discharge as of Right)

'I find the training and discipline hard….I am in trouble most days…I make lots of mistakes and the platoon gets beasted'

Recruit 15 (Discharge as of Right)

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

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

Commanding Officer of Recruit 4 (Discharge as of Right)

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

Commanding Officer of Recruit 15 (Discharge as of Right)

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

4.2. Fitting In

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

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

Recruit 1 (Discharge as of Right)

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

Recruit 5 (Discharge as of Right)

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

Recruit 7 (Discharge as of Right)

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

Recruit 12 (Discharge as of Right)

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

Recruit 13 (Discharge as of Right)

Recruit 4 found the training hard and felt that he was always physically playing catch up. A point came when he began to feel that he did not fit in and became increasingly homesick,

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

'he was very homesick……failed to adapt to Army life…he has the capability to pass but would need to show far more commitment'

Commanding Officer Recruit 4 (Discharge as of Right)

4.3. Physical & Cultural Demands

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

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

Recruit 6 (Discharged as of Right)

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

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

'I miss my girlfriend ……my freedom…I am too young for this life at the moment'
Recruit 9 (Unsuitable for Army Service)

'he is severely depressed and cannot handle the regime within the training establishment……he is not physically or mentally strong enough for the Army and should not be allowed to re-join as he is not suited in any shape or form'
Commanding Officer Recruit 9 (Unsuitable for Army Service)

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

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

'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 of privacy'

Recruit 7 (Discharge as of Right)

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

Recruit 30 (Discharge as of Right)

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

Recruit 27 (Services no Longer Required)

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

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

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

Recruit 6 (Discharge as of Right)

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

Recruit 9 (Unsuitable for Army Service)

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

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

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

Recruit 16 (Discharge as of Right)

Individual Demands

4.4. Emotional Demands

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

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

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

Recruit 15 (Discharge as of Right)

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

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

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

He then goes on to say:

'I miss my friends and family'

Recruit 12 (Discharge as of Right)

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

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

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

Recruit 27 (Service No Longer Required)

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

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

Commanding Officer Recruit 27

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

4.5. Summary of Findings

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

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

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

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

5. Discussion

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

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

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

4.1. Coping

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

4.2. *Expectation*

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

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

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

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

4.3. Enlistment process

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4.4. *Summary*

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

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

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Table 1: Training outcomes with reason for failure

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%)
	Total	362 (100%)

Figure 1: Semi Structured Interview Template

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?

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**
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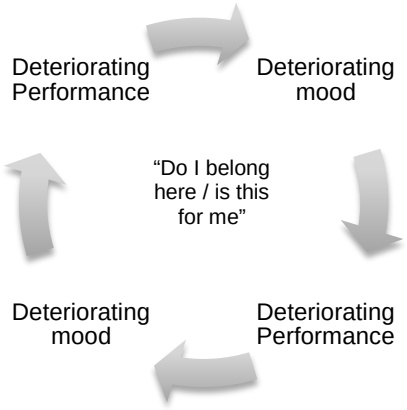

Figure 4: Process of analysis: Mapping and Interpretation

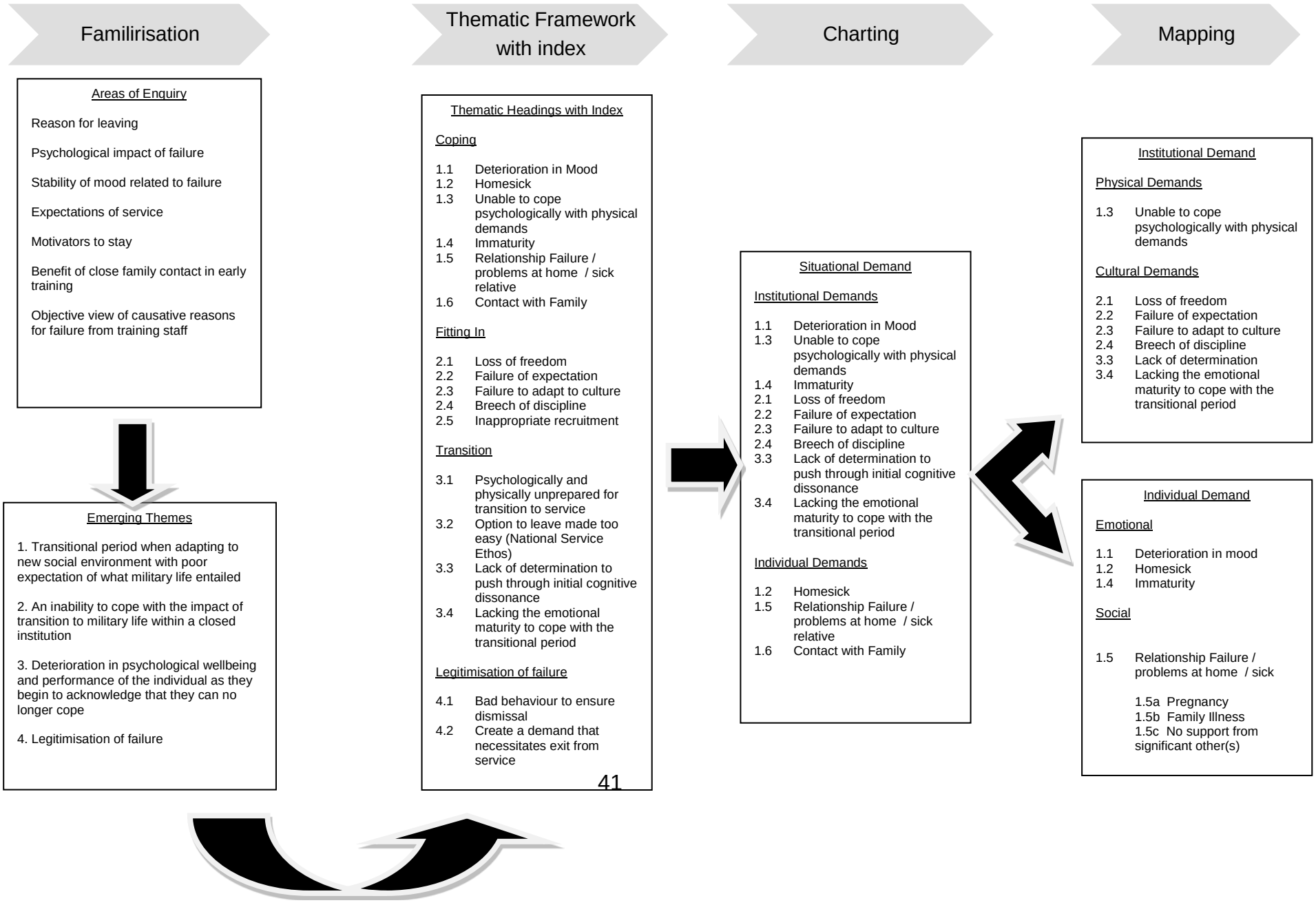

Figure 5: Impact of multiple situational stressors on the recruit's ability to complete training

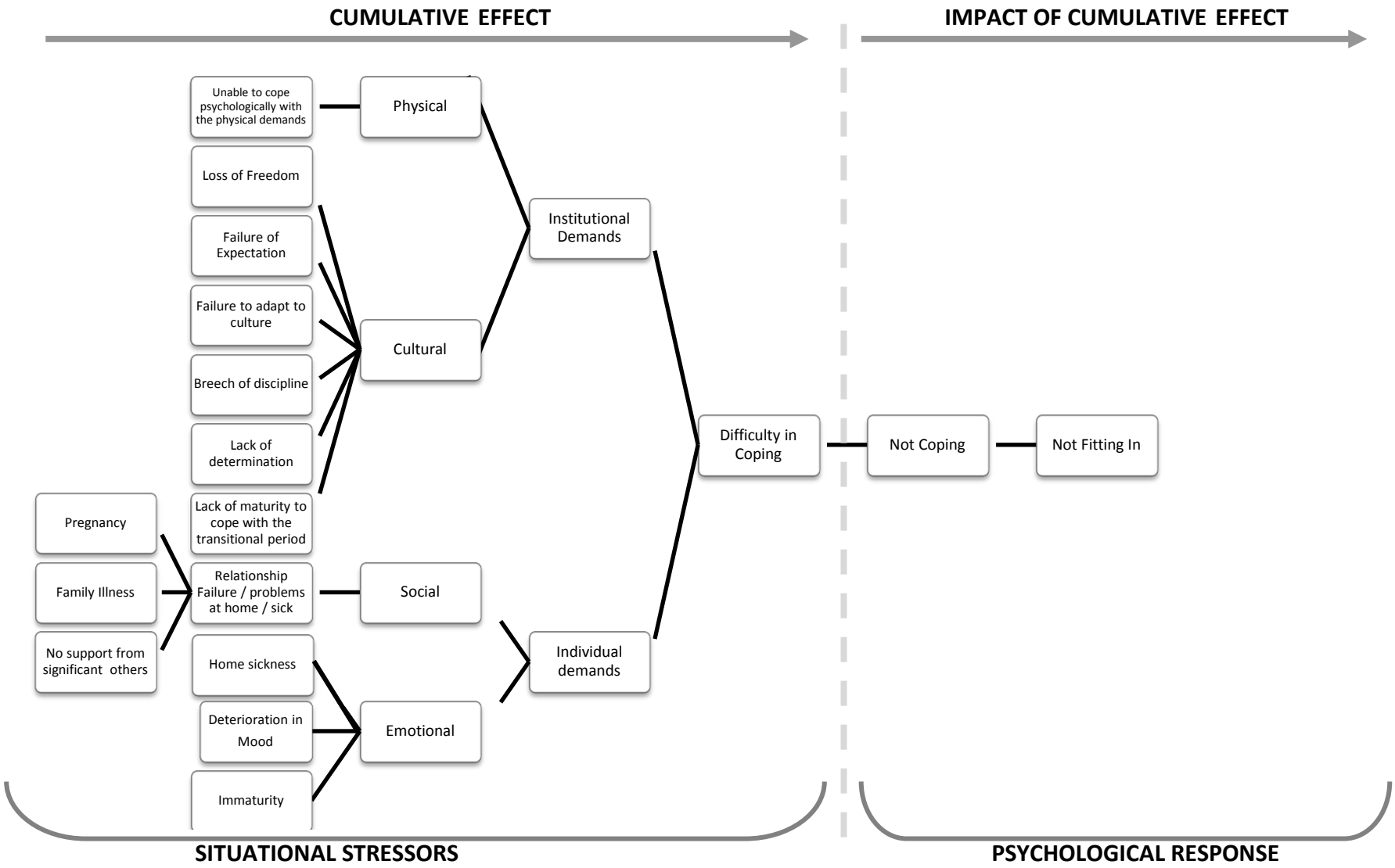

Figure 6: Journey to discharge

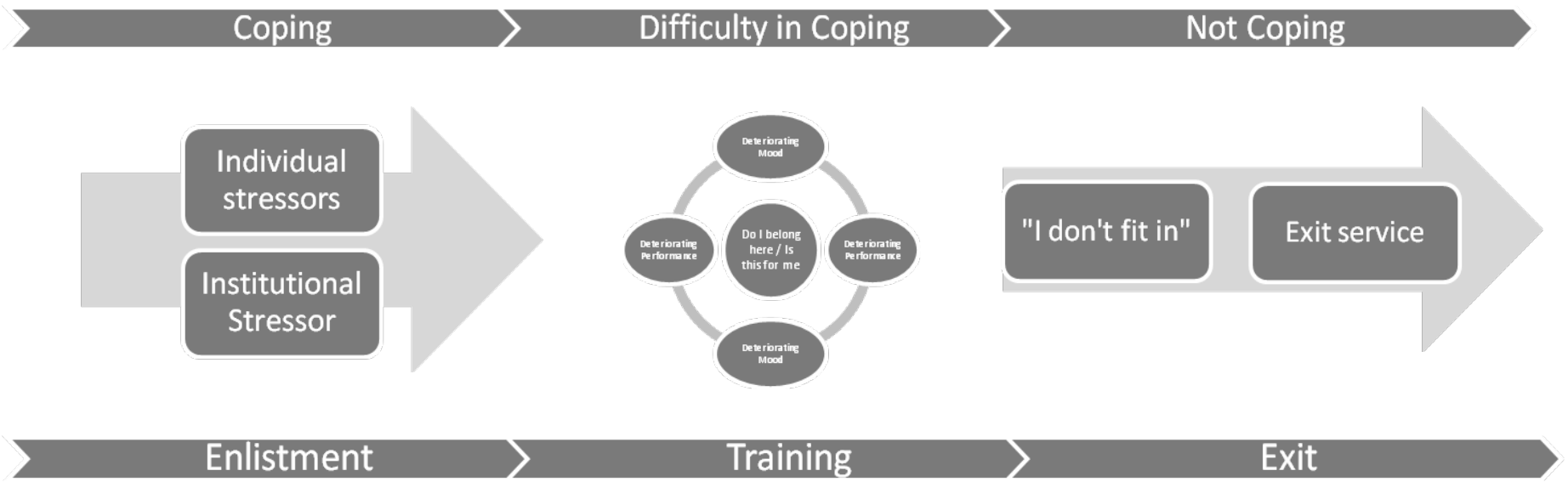
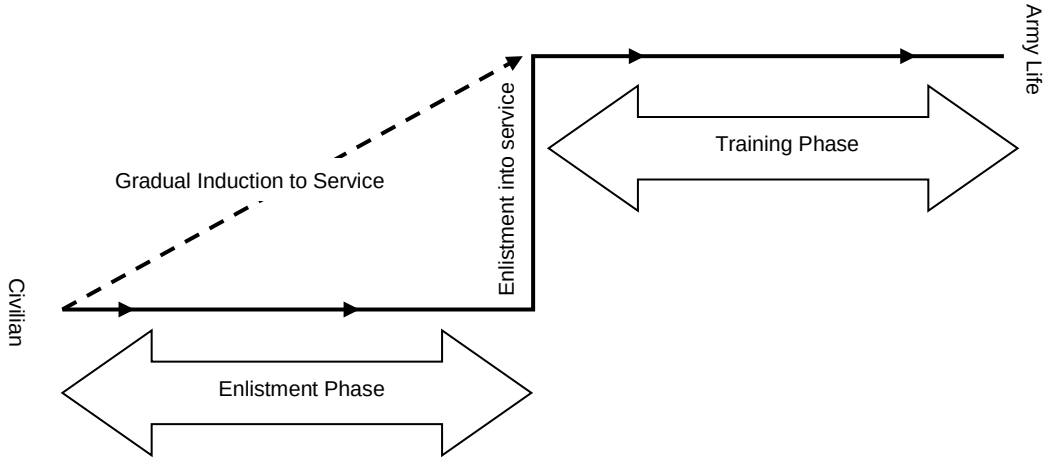
Figure 7: **Enlistment journey**