

The Effects of Religious Preference and the Frequency of Spirituality on the Retention and Attrition Rates Among Injured Soldiers

Steven L. Jordan, Sr.

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THE EFFECTS OF RELIGIOUS PREFERENCE AND THE FREQUENCY
OF SPIRITUALITY ON THE RETENTION AND ATTRITION RATES
AMONG INJURED SOLDIERS

by

Steven L. Jordan

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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Abstract

Using a quantitative causal-comparative approach, the researcher conducted a relational study that compared injured and rehabilitated soldiers with no religious foundation to similar soldiers possessing religious preferences and spirituality. The two primary research questions were (a) Does religious preference and spirituality have a positive impact on the retention and attrition rates of injured soldiers? (b) Does an injured soldier's frequency of spirituality increase the likelihood of being returned to initial-entry training? The study addressed several possible variables; among these were the importance of religious preference and spirituality in returning injured soldiers to training; the determination of a soldier's level of spirituality and its healing impact; spirituality's effect on the injured soldier's psychotherapy, and other related demographic factors.

Dedication

Dedicated in loving memory to Lawrence and Wilma Herron, my wife's parents, and John P. Shaw, my grandfather, and to my mother, Eleanor Shell and my father, Joseph Jackson, I am grateful to all you for my family legacy.

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I want to express appreciation to numerous individuals who contributed to this study. First, I offer my sincere appreciation to the unknown participants whose data was used during this study to richly enhance our knowledge and understanding of the importance of religious preference and spirituality.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction to the Problem

The United States Army sought to retain fully qualified soldiers to meet its increasing demands for combat operations. When initial-entry soldiers failed to meet some required standard and were discharged from the Army without fulfilling their initial obligation to serve, the attrition rate increased, exacerbating existing shortages resulting from decreased retention rates (Hayden, 2005). Retention, as it is to any corporation utilizing the human resource, is very important to the U.S. Army. Operating with an all-volunteer force since the mandatory draft ended in the 1960s, the Army has been solely dependent upon volunteers for over 40 years (USARPAO, 2005). Thus, both low retention rates and high attrition rates subtract from the availability of fully qualified soldiers.

Simultaneously, as world conditions and national and homeland defense situations continued to demand the presence of U.S. Army soldiers to meet their missions, the requirement to train adequate numbers of qualified soldiers, the foundation of the Army's infrastructure, became a matter of critical importance to the nation (USGAO, 2005). Problems experienced at any juncture in the process consequently became highly visible issues, and usually gained the support and attention of Army leadership at the highest levels to negate its effects. Collectively, the challenge was to identify those elements of the training program that increased retention of qualified soldiers and reduced attrition, particularly among initial-entry soldiers, and duplicate them to gain the desired results (Hayden, 2005). Both low retention and high attrition contributed to the number of available soldiers for missions at home and abroad. This existing shortage was the fundamental problem; identifying effective program elements was the process by which to

effect these changes. A high attrition rate and low retention rate significantly impacted and compromised the Army's mission readiness and its ability to deploy and defend the U.S. and its interests (USGAO, 2005).

The training process was identified as one of the major opportunities for failure in this process as it had the task of taking American youths from the streets of any city or town in America and converting them into qualified and trained soldiers, and its success or failure was documented in annual statistics. When a soldier enlisted and was admitted into the service, the Army had already made a sizable investment in that person (USARRPAO, 2005). The recruiting process included numerous phone calls and letters that were as costly as advertising brochures and literature produced by civilian advertising agencies. In addition, recruitment personnel and other military entry-admission support personnel salaries and benefits packages increased the investment (USARRPAO, 2005). Because this training was designed to address numerous aspects of human capabilities, it was both physically and mentally demanding. When these physical demands resulted in injuries that tended to separate a large number of otherwise qualified soldiers, both attrition and retention were negatively affected. In an effort to promote soldier retention and reduce attrition, and realizing that vigorous physical training requirements would most likely result in injuries of various degrees, Army training managers strove to identify the elements in the training program that kept soldiers motivated in spite of injuries and allowed them to remain determined to fulfill their enlistment obligation, a strong desire for the Army (Terenzini, 1991). Seeking a return on their initial investment, and with a concern to meet the demands for soldiers wherever needed, the Army was focused on effective solutions that would result in decreased attrition rates and increased soldier retention rates (Hayden, 2005).

This study focused on two aspects of the training process believed to impact soldier commitment: religious preference and spirituality. As part of their initial entry process, soldier feedback was analyzed to determine if religious preferences and frequency of religious practices resulted in positive effects upon rehabilitation and the soldier's return to training and completion of the initial commitment; both actions would positively affect attrition and retention rates.

Background of the Study

Soldier injuries are and have been one of the most serious and costly problems for the Army (USGAO, 2005). When soldiers were injured, the training process was abruptly interrupted, the initial return on investment declined, and the Army fell short of its personnel goals one soldier at a time. There were, however, those soldiers who sustained injuries in training, yet overcame them to return to training and fulfill their initial obligation to the Army. The Army sought to analyze this success more closely in an effort to identify and duplicate successful training program elements (Hayden, 2005). This study took place at the 120th Adjutant General Reception Battalion located at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, the Army's largest and most active Initial Entry Training Center in the United States. It trains 34% of all soldiers and 69% of women entering the Army each year. More specifically, the study took place in the Physical Training Rehabilitation Program (PTRP), a program developed exclusively for the initial-entry soldier who sustained an injury during training that removed him or her from the standard training schedule. This program required a period of rehabilitation and successful completion before the soldier was allowed to return to the normal training schedule.

As a part of this process, and as is the standard for all military installations, a chaplain was assigned to assist in the spiritual and psychological aspects of the training and its impacts

upon the soldier. Under the PTRP, the chaplain's trained staff assisted soldiers in a variety of ways ranging from spiritual and personal counseling to pluralistic religious services and educational classes. At this location, the chaplain and staff developed a comprehensive program designed to address a variety of needs called the Creative Wellness Spiritual Fitness Program (CWSFP). During the recovery period, injured soldiers were assigned to the PTRP and participated in the CWSFP. The CWSFP used the Creative Wellness Therapeutic Model (CWTM); both the CWSFP and CWTM were instruments designed to promote spiritual growth and development. The results validated the importance of spiritual fitness, religious preference, and spirituality.

Occasionally, throughout the rigorous physical demands of the training process, soldiers sustained injuries (James & Duclow, 2002). When injured during training, soldiers became frustrated and discouraged by not being able to perform normal daily tasks. They felt disappointed, rejected, and embarrassed, feelings that negatively affected their psychology (Christensen, 1999). Training for success increasingly became a balance between achieving peak performance and avoiding the negative consequences of over-training (Bravermann, 1995). While the Army viewed over-training as the correct format for combat training, it could also result in numerous injuries (Swank & McCully, 2001). Behavioral scientists claim that attrition in organizations can be attributed to many factors, such as lack of commitment to the organization, poor skills development, a mismatch in employee expectations, lack of motivation, and failure to meet necessary performance standards (Hayden, 2005). In the case of the injured soldier, an overwhelming feeling of having failed to meet expectations was prevalent (Christensen, 1999). Training assessments that fell below what was considered optimal did not

result in the desired adaptation (i.e., the greatest possible gain in performance); training requirements that fell above the optimum may have, among other things, led to a condition usually referred to as the “overtraining syndrome,” “staleness“ or “burnout” (Braverman, 1995). Hard- or over-training could apparently be the formula for both success and failure.

The injuries came in many forms and ranged greatly in severity. Stress fractures, coupled with other athletic injuries, have been a principal cause of pain and disability for Americans under the age of 35. Collectively, 75% to 90% of these injuries were mild or moderate, and such patients usually had good potential for returning to work. Rehabilitation programs abound for this population, despite little scientific evidence as to their efficacy (Braverman, 1995). The soldier, a subset of this population, faced similar challenges when physically trained and certainly when over-trained.

In order to adequately analyze the attrition of soldiers in the Army, many factors must be considered since their attrition was due to a culmination of many factors (USGAO, 2005). These factors varied with every soldier depending on the circumstances each brought into the Army, and what occurred during the initial-entry training process (USARRPAO, 2005). Some soldiers did not desire to return to training even after successfully completing the traditional Physical Training and Rehabilitation Program (PTRP). This meant the traditional program lacked some important aspects needed to make sure that injured soldiers were recovered, ready, and willing to return to their training (Hayden, 2005). There was no existing program extensive enough to measure the complete training and recovery process as it related to spiritual influence because soldiers have different spiritual beliefs, but an attempt was made to adequately identify those spiritual elements believed to influence soldier retention (Lerner, 2000).

Based on recent research, theories, and data from the U.S. Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine (USACHPPM)'s Spirituality and Resilience Assessment (SRA), spirituality could have a positive effect on a person's psychological wellbeing. (USACHPPM, 2005). Consequently, it may have been introduced as a means to help injured soldiers recover and return to their duties (Duclow & James, 2002). Additionally, spirituality's positive effect could have been a key element to help lower injured soldiers' attrition rate (Lerner, 2000). The USACHPPM's INSPIRIT Factor Structure, the scoring system used in the USACHPPM's SRA, provided a category for comparative analysis to reflect upon the pros and cons of the research findings and quantified the conceptual development and related meaning of the respondent's scores. Effective socialization programs were believed to be keys in addressing some of these factors, and the significance of spirituality and spiritual wellbeing could have been one of the basic principles used to improve the socialization experience (Feingold & Helminiak, 2000). Effectively identifying and including spirituality in the soldier's Initial Entry Training produced awareness of untapped spiritual resiliency resources and helped to reduce the Army's attrition rate (USACHPPM, 2005). Achieving this goal provided the critical mass of soldiers needed to maintain the forces of the Army to serve our nation in the 21st century (USGAO, 2005).

Based on the Army's need to further analyze program elements that produced positive results for both soldier retention and reduced attrition among initial-entry soldiers, and particularly those who were injured in the process, Army commanders at every level approved the commencement of the study.

Statement of the Problem

The problem was twofold: First, the declining retention rate among soldiers resulted in a failure to meet annual end strength personnel requirements for the Army. The low retention rate nullified the sizeable initial investment and resulted in the premature dismissal of otherwise qualified soldiers. Secondly, the high attrition rate among initial-entry soldiers due to physical injuries and other quality-of-life issues compounded the problem and resulted in a more dramatic shortage even after the significant initial investment. The high attrition rate significantly reduced the Army Recruiting Command's proclaimed success and resulted in failure to meet annual personnel strength goals. Both situations contributed to the lack of available qualified soldiers to meet an increasing national and international demand for the same. With an extremely high initial investment in these soldiers who were injured and did not return to training, the Army gained zero return while requesting an exorbitant amount of money for the next year's annual training budget, only to repeat failures of previous years (USARRPAO, 2005).

The soldier retention rate, as depicted in its 2004 *United States Army Recruiting Command Report* submitted by the United States Army Recruiting Regional Public Affairs Offices (USARRPAO), identified the nature of this problem. This report indicated that the Army Recruiting Command reached its annual recruiting goals for the fifth consecutive year. It provided demographics of the Army's success during fiscal year 2004 in recruiting active duty and reserve soldiers as follows: the Army recruited 77,587 soldiers for the active Army and exceeded its fiscal year 2004 mission by 587, achieving 100.8%. The Army Reserves recruited 21,278 soldiers, exceeding their fiscal year 2004 goal of 21,200 by 78, thus achieving 100.4% (USARRPAO, 2005).

These numbers increased exponentially when compared to the additional cost to rehabilitate injured soldiers and their high attrition due to injuries. Once a soldier was injured, he or she remained in physical rehabilitative training at the Physical Training Rehabilitation Program (PTRP) at Fort Jackson, South Carolina from 3 months to a year with full pay and benefits. Separating thousands of soldiers early each year meant that the Army received only a partial return on the significant initial investment made in recruiting and training these soldiers. According to the Department of Defense (DoD), the average cost of recruiting and training each soldier was \$35,532. Using this figure, the USGAO estimated that the Army lost literally millions of dollars annually because of high soldier attrition related to injury and other quality-of-life issues (USGAO, 2005).

According to the United States General Accounting Office (USGAO), the high attrition rate was the result of several factors. First, an average of 31.7% of the 77,000 personnel recruited by the Army each year were separated during their initial tour of duty due to injury or quality-of-life issues. According to the USGAO statistics, 11% separated before they completed 6 months of service, and 20.7% separated after 6 months, when most had completed initial training. The USGAO recommended that effective solutions to this problem encompass program elements that would effect positive changes in both soldier attrition and retention (USGAO, 2005). This was significant to the study in that these statistics quantified the problem as stated in the main two hypotheses, namely that Army's retention rates were low among this population, while attrition continued to escalate. Similarly, these types of injuries dictated the continued need for injury control, with a wide application in civilian sports and exercise programs as well (James & Duclow, 2002).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine if religious preference or more broadly, spirituality, and the frequency of these practices, along with several other demographic and military experience variables, contributed to reduced attrition and increased retention rate of injured soldiers returning to initial-entry training. With focused attention on the two main variables, spirituality and religious preference, it differentiated between religious preference and spirituality. Religious preference was defined as a simple yes or no response to whether a soldier had a religious preference upon entry into the Army. Subsequent questions delineated the specific preferences further, but for the purpose of this study, religious preference simply indicated whether a servicemember had a religious preference or not. Spirituality was defined as entailing the frequency of spiritual practices and indicated a more involved, committed, and personal religious preference.

Frequency was divided in terms of how often a soldier practiced his or her religious preference or spirituality (daily, weekly, less frequently than both) and conclusions were drawn on the servicemember's level of spirituality based on frequency. While both spirituality and a positive response to religious preference were considered part of overall spirituality, the frequency of those practices were the determining factor for the extent of spirituality the servicemember employed in conjunction with the effects of their rehabilitation.

This study proposed to determine whether religious preference and spirituality, the frequency of spirituality, and other variables to include demographics and military experiences could have an impact on recovering injured soldiers, assisting in their rehabilitation process and successfully returning them to training to complete their initial obligation to the Army. The

results of the study may offer new insights into untapped spiritual resource and could justify future research in this subject.

Rationale

The rationale for this study was to provide Army leaders with quantifiable data reflecting potential causes and effects contributing to the high attrition and low retention rate among initial entry soldiers. To address related concerns and explore possible causes, and to provide concrete recommendations regarding specific successful program elements that affect attrition and retention, the study considered factors such as the soldier's psychological, spiritual, social, and emotional states as well as other practical variables, and focused on the frequency of spirituality's impact on both retention and attrition, all characteristics believed to influence the soldier's success.

Through this study, the Army gained insight into how religious preference and spirituality, and other related variables affected the institution's ability to retain its soldiers (Lerner, 2000). With this information, the Army could consider the development of strategies and programs that better cultivated soldiers' spiritual resiliency related to combat readiness challenges and thus improve the retention rate of injured initial-entry soldiers.

Research Questions

This study explored these two primary hypotheses: Religious preference and the frequency of spirituality practices can have a positive impact on the retention and attrition rates for injured soldiers enrolled in the Army's Physical Training Rehabilitation Program. "Positive" referred to a decrease in attrition rates and an increase in the number of soldiers who could be retained in the Army. The second primary hypothesis: Soldiers who identify a higher level of

spirituality are more likely to graduate from PTRP and return to initial-entry training than those who have less frequent spiritual practices (Duclow & James, 2002). In other words, would injured soldiers with a higher level of spirituality continue the rehabilitation program using their daily practice of faith and other attributes of spirituality as tools for promoting internal psychological, social, and spiritual resiliency while matriculating through the Army's Physical Training Rehabilitation Program, and would soldiers without spiritual foundations fail to graduate?

The following additional secondary hypotheses were considered as alternative causal relationships between the independent variables of retention and attrition: (a) Component: Active duty soldiers will return to training in larger numbers than those assigned to the Army National Guard and Army Reserve since active duty soldiers are generally younger and in better physical shape; (b) Gender: Male soldiers will return to training in larger numbers than female soldiers. The rehabilitation process for females has historically been more extensive than that of their male counterparts. Additionally, injuries sustained by female soldiers result in termination of training at a higher rate than male soldiers; (c) Age: The younger soldiers are, the more likely they will be rehabilitated and returned to training. It is assumed younger soldiers will be in better physical shape, will handle the injury more effectively, and will persist in efforts to bring about healing and rehabilitation; (d) Race: White soldiers return to training in larger numbers than soldiers of other ethnic groups. White members tend to be less overweight and in better physical conditions than members from other ethnicities; consequently, they rehabilitate sooner and return to complete training; (e) Education level: The higher the soldier's educational level, the more likely that he/she will be rehabilitated and returned to training. Environmental impacts from