

## Issues In Temperamental Unsuitability Re-Examining Concepts And Current Practice In The British Army

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### ABSTRACT

**Currently, in the UK military, and particularly in the Army, a significant number of personnel are regularly discharged on the grounds of being assessed as "Temperamentally Unsuitable (TU) for military duties", under Queen's Regulations (QRs): (Army) 9.414 and 9.434 (1). In the last two years (2001-2003), preliminary figures suggest that approximately 700 serving personnel were recommended for discharge under this category by only four psychiatrists in the south of England. The regulations governing TU have been in existence and essentially unchanged since their development long before the 1960s albeit subject to parliamentary quinquennial review. The Army General and Administrative Instructions (AGAI) (2) standards also remain unchanged over this period. This paper raises questions about the current validity and relevance of existing TU concepts and regulations with suggestions as to what is being proposed in the context of changing roles, technology and advances in the modern armed forces.**

### Introduction

#### Temperamental Unsuitability (TU)

There are a number of problems with the TU concept and regulations as they exist today; a lack of academic and clinical consensus on the definition and operational criteria of "temperamental unsuitability", and the variable application of the psychiatric opinion, for what would appear to amount to a mis-match between individual and military environment or role. Yet, in practice, TU is widely used as a legitimate, expeditious exit -route for disaffected, inefficient or non-effective service personnel, often as an alternative to more appropriate administrative procedures, which would otherwise be protracted, thereby burdening units.

The existing criteria for TU are vague and intangible, and raise several questions; how do we define "temperament" - personality traits, behaviour or attitude?; is the "unsuitable temperament" reflecting a definable pathological diagnosis?; is TU considered to be enduring and intractable

regardless of environment or time, or indeed, is TU a "state", i.e. reactive to the presenting circumstances and only applicable to military environment? Does the existence of such a category infer a mis-match between personality characteristics and military generally? Or is it, as is more often the case, a reactive incompatibility between the individual, for example, failed expectations, and the demands of military life e.g. postings, deployments and unconditional acceptance of authority and hierarchy?

### Historical Perspective

The history of (temperament) personality assessment in the military dates back to WW2. In the US, psychologists' roles developed from basic personnel selection through to utilising clinical expertise in the field of personality assessment in 1941, with a keen focus on developing procedures to predict behaviour in typical Army conditions and on differential diagnosis of neuro-psychiatric conditions Rath & McCarroll (3). Post WW2, the focus of activity remained primarily in psychological assessment and personality specifically, but between the early 60's and late 80's there is a relative gap in the literature on personality assessment in the military. The basis for this is unclear but may be related to debates and controversies in the field of personality measurement at this time.

Milgram (4) highlights that whilst there is a general acknowledgement in the military field of the importance of personality variables in all phases of military life, there is a paucity of military psychology literature dedicated to this area. The majority of activity had been undertaken in the occupational domain i.e. personality assessment for selection, with research focusing on recruitment and attrition. It would seem that the areas of retention, resilience, recovery and adaptability have been somewhat neglected.

Most importantly there appears to be no established scientific background to the research of TU as it has not, to our knowledge, been studied within the British Army before. A review of international and reputed literature databases in the public domain, and internal restricted databases has not elicited any previous research. There

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has been, however, internal unpublished correspondence on the issue of TU, which of course has a potential for bias. The only article obtained relating specifically to the concept of TU is a 1947 article from USA/Canada entitled "Signs of Temperamental Unsuitability in Aircrew under Training", Air Ministry, Air Publication 3139 (5). The emphasis of this article is on fearfulness in relation to flying and therefore not reflective of the broader concept of TU for the military.

### **TU Today**

In all three military services, TU is seen as a non-medical, but administrative discharge. However, it necessitates a psychiatric opinion to exclude any mental illness albeit that this opinion is sought at the discretion of the Medical Officer.

Where the QRs for the three armed forces suggest a need for a recommendation from a Service Psychiatrist for TU, broad guidelines are offered for this. The operationalisation of these regulations in the single service instructions (in this case AGAI) varies considerably, with resultant variations in the interpretation of TU concepts and practice. For example, the Army, unlike the Navy, adopts an all-or-nothing approach and does not consider categories of TU severity, nor see it as amenable to treatment. The problem with this being the obvious loss of potentially redeemable trained personnel.

It could be argued that, even in the face of presenting problems with "temperament" in the soldier, that the presence of these should not be the focus of a clinical or administrative decision. Rather, the assessment should focus on what factors helped to generate the (unsuitable) "temperament" now or what factors protected against its expression earlier. In other words, what has occurred to trigger latent traits, otherwise controlled prior to the referral? As Wickenden (6) argues, that in cases where the soldier has consistently struggled to perform adequately, it begs the question - could the selection process have identified these factors? In observing selection procedures locally, the authors identified a number of points where changes could be made in this regard. The gathering of historical information could be more comprehensive and areas of concern highlighted and explored further before selection. More importantly the subjective and often brief process of advising on "suitable roles or trades" following British Army Recruitment Battery (BARB) assessments, means that the match between the person and trade is frequently informed by interviewer bias or simply recruit "interest". Whilst "screening" methods are inherently problematic with respect to 100% accuracy, the process of highlighting

identified risk factors, rather than screening out of cases, would aim to inform more productive monitoring of potentially vulnerable recruits and hopefully inform better preventative and management strategies when difficulties arise.

The susceptibility to amelioration of such "unsuitable" characteristics via management or treatment could be a key aspect of the decision making process, and the offer of appropriate evidence-based interventions, the thrust of the organisation's retention strategy. The Navy has moved forward in this respect, so that the Temperamentally Unsuitable sailor is likely to be classified by a Psychiatrist according to a system of establishing severity of personality or behavioural disturbance based on its amenability to intervention. This allows for retention in the service if the disorder is mild or moderate. However, there are no guidelines or recommendations on the nature of such interventions, rendering evaluation of successful strategies difficult.

### **What Research Is Necessary**

The study of temperament or personality traits and social/situational factors in relation to suitability, psychological fitness and adaptability for the military environment seems key to the concept of TU. Anecdotal evidence from service psychiatrists, suggests that the assessment for TU is multidimensional i.e. the interplay between personality characteristics and contextual factors.

However, there is a need for the specific discriminative analysis of those factors that may not only be predictive of 'best fit for role' but also those that may later interfere with optimal performance in specific roles or environments. Such factors may include personality traits, social or situational factors or stress tolerance and adaptability characteristics. In this respect, it seems we should concern ourselves with the identification and resolution of key factors that may serve as risk and protective factors in *adaptation* to the demands of (un)familiar operational environments and *resilience* within and *recovery* from enduring stress situations.

In our experience the assessment process reveals that the TU situation arises as a result of breakdown in adaptation to the environment, resulting in disaffection and lack of motivation for military life. This breakdown can be caused by a number of factors including; work related issues, for example failed expectations, dislike of trade, conflict with authority, or to changes in personal circumstances, for example new relationship, family demands, children, divorce/separation. Whilst personality characteristics are rarely formally assessed, there is an informal acknowledgement within the psychiatric profession that certain

traits, for example, obsessive-compulsive, antisocial, dependant or paranoid, may interfere with some soldiers' resilience within operational situations.

There is a lack of information on the relevance of currently available standardised personality assessment measures to the military and moreover, British military population. The use of commonly used measures in the Armed forces in the absence of appropriate military norms would be questionable, since they are not a representative cross section of society and therefore can not be readily compared to normative student, psychiatric or general populations typically used as standardisation samples. Indeed, where measures are available, these tend to have been validated on non-British populations rendering direct comparisons difficult. The military rationale for a comprehensive research and development strategy in the area of temperament and suitability would appear necessary. The cross-cultural differences in military selection, training and roles would indicate a clear need for a British contribution to the development of appropriate assessment tools, norms and evidence-based practice.

### Our Study

We hope to explore the relevance of a range of factors in TU, in particular those characteristics and circumstances that may render individuals as suited or unsuited to military service including (though not exclusively) social, situational, personality and stress tolerance/adaptability factors. The current operational concept of TU is however, a vague, broad and multifaceted one and which varies across the three branches of the military services. There is a need to examine the concept of TU as laid out in the current AGAI, and its relationship with modern views of Personality development and exploration of the possible impact of multiple military deployments.

The aim of the proposal is to identify risk and protective factors (including personality variables) for TU in military personnel, with a view to informing strategic developments at the stages of recruitment, selection and retention. It is envisaged that this research process will involve two stages:

1. A retrospective case file audit of a cohort of personnel who have already been recommended for (and/or discharged by) TU. This would identify commonalities in factors currently assessed and considered to be associated with TU.

2. A prospective research study - following recruits through training, to vocational employment, and tracking those who become "TU". The aim would be to assess the reliability and validity of those factors identified at stage 1. Given the likelihood of undisclosed risk factors at selection, it would also allow for identification of emerging and previously unidentified risk and protective factors. It is hoped that long term follow-up would allow for investigation of any associated relationship with later mental illness and adjustment to civilian life.

Longer-term implications of the research would be in the use of reliable and valid assessment of Personality and "TU", aiming to inform management strategies during training where possible. Given the limitations of predictive risk assessment and emergence of false negative cases, it would seem more beneficial to use risk factors to identify and manage vulnerable soldiers from the point of selection than risk screening out potentially malleable and successful recruits. Further development of the research is hoped to inform standardised protocols for specific or specialist sub-groups of military personnel, whose roles may require specific characteristics to enhance performance for, or recovery, from specialist deployments.

### References

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