

RES-000-22-0769 - The Family and Military as Greedy Institutions: Negotiating a Work-life Balance

There is evidence that stress related to balancing work and personal life could cost UK business up to £10bn per annum. Both the family and the Army have been described by researchers as “greedy institutions,” which demand unquestioning commitment and undivided loyalty from their members. The armed services, including the British Army, which is the focus of this study, require levels of sacrifice, frequent mobility, dealing with physical danger and responsibilities that extend beyond the normal boundaries of duty hours and workplace. Changing patterns of gender behaviour may also have influenced expectations of spouses’ family responsibilities. This study examines the extent to which military personnel and their spouses encounter conflicting pressures during a six-month period of deployment in Iraq.

Key findings

Husbands and wives had differing perceptions of the problems associated with deployment. The key conclusion is that wives are more stoical or resilient than soldiers think they are. The work-life tensions of military life are also outweighed by the financial security provided by the Army.

Work-life tensions between Army wives and the British Army

- 51% of wives thought their marriage was negatively affected by their husband’s career and 47% saw this tension as emotional conflict, especially family stress caused by long absences and husbands missing key family occasions. Practical conflict arose from husbands not being around to share family responsibilities.
- Of the 37 couples who completed a pre- and post- deployment questionnaire, 89% of husbands thought that family life was more important than their careers. 41% of wives thought their husbands’ careers were of equal importance to their home life.

Factors that mitigate and aggravate work-life tensions

- Relocation was the most commonly cited pay-off to the tensions of military life, but it also caused problems such as disruptions to schooling, loss of social networks and loss of wives’ employment.
- Separation as a result of deployment was reported as the main cause of work-life tension between families and the Army.

Non-negotiable demands of the Army

- All the wives except one said they did not have a say in their husbands’ work commitments but 53% of wives accepted this was the nature of the Army.

- Wives commented on the uncertainty of family life due to their lack of control over their husbands' absences, postings, housing, healthcare and children's education.

Belonging to the wider military family

- Tax breaks, quality of living, subsidised schooling, good medical care, generous holidays and social status associated with seniority were seen as benefits of Army life.
- Wives complained about lack of privacy, but enjoyed the social support of the community.

Financial security

- Many wives appreciated the job and financial security provided by the Army, including its pension.

Wives' overall satisfaction with military life

- At the start of deployment 83% of wives felt proud of their husband's career, but half of the wives were not happy their husbands were in the Armed Forces. At the end of deployment 88% of wives wanted their husbands to stay in the Army for financial reasons.
- Wives became more mentally robust during the deployment.
- Wives favoured informal social networks of support and saw the military as a safety net rather than the first line of support.
- Both wives and husbands agreed that better telecommunication facilities for soldiers in Iraq would reduce deployment-related stress.

About the study

The study was conducted by Professor C Dandeker, Miss C French and Dr S Thomas, Department of War Studies, King's College, London.

The findings are based on 50 British Army wives who completed face-to-face interviews around the start of their husband's deployment to Iraq in 2004. These interviews were followed up by a mid-deployment postal questionnaire and a final face-to-face interview post deployment. The researchers also drew on data from the parallel study of the health and wellbeing of their husbands who deployed to Iraq.

Key words

Military, wellbeing, work-life balance, army