"The Greatest Teacher, Failure Is": Handling Failure in Military Parachute Training

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Abstract

The present study examined failure in an extreme setting within a military parachute training course used to better prepare individuals for combat. A grounded theory analysis of interviews and observations led to four interdependent reasons for failure, three mediating factors of how failure was perceived, and eight ways of coping in how individuals handled failure. Two overarching master themes were established of decision aversion where individuals tend to avoid making decisions regarding their own failure in order to minimize guilt and shame, and externalization where attribution is made primarily to causes outside the self in order to maintain a positive self-image. In a few cases, active measures were taken to overcome failure, most often by the ones with the strongest reactions of surprise and anger, somewhat counterintuitively indicating that the worst reactions bring out the most successful coping. Suggestions for further research and implementation in extreme military training courses are discussed.

Keywords: coping, leadership, parachute, failure

Introduction

"The greatest teacher, failure is," said Yoda to his padawan Luke Skywalker in the motion picture *The Last Jedi*, signifying that in order to achieve strength and mastery students must acquire the ability to learn from mistakes and failure (Kennedy & Johnson, 2017). Falling short of our goals is something that happens to all of us, whether it is in sports, in education, or in our professions. Since failure is an undesired outcome, we will then have to deal both with an undesired and often unexpected result as well as our perceptions of our own abilities. Failure can have negative effects, but handled in the right way, it can also offer us valuable insights about ourselves. The most successful athletes, students, and CEOs (or Jedi-knights) are not necessarily those who have never failed or made mistakes, but often those who have mastered the ability to learn from them.

Although failure is present in all professions, military organizations differ in two central ways. *The first* is the consequences of failure. For example, although failing at a task in a commercial company can lead to lawsuits, layoffs, or even bankruptcy, failure in military organizations can lead to severe injury or even death for oneself and others (Klann, 2003).

The second is the inherent problems in training individuals for such extreme conditions. An athlete can adhere to the principle of specificity and get better at running a marathon by practicing exactly that. Similarly, an intern at a company can learn skills required at a certain position by on-the-job training. But due to both ethical and practical reasons it would be impossible to expose military personnel to the life-threatening dangers of real combat to better train for that situation. Because of this, military organizations utilize training courses which exposes individuals to as an extreme environment as possible within ethical limits (Meichenbaum, 1985, 2007). Exposing individuals to a high but manageable level of stress will make them better prepared for similar future situations (Maddi, 2002, 2006, 2007; Maddi & Kobasa, 1984). One of the most prominent examples of a substitute for combat is parachute training (Boe & Hagen, 2015; Kolditz, 2007; Samuels, Foster, & Lindsay, 2010; Shalit, Carlstedt, Ståhlberg-Carlstedt, & Täljedal-Shalit, 1986).

Parachuting has been regarded as ideal to study the effects of extreme stress since it combines as much strain as can be applied to a person within ethical limits, together with the stringent controls that can otherwise only be obtained in the laboratory (Fenz, 1975). Since its introduction on a large scale in the military in the 1940s, parachute training has been considered a good substitute for combat because individuals' reactions have been described as similar to combat (McMillan & Rachman, 1988). The experience has been described as "real or potential threat to life" (Basowitz, Persky, Korchin, & Grinker, 1955, p. 23). Although stringent controls are in place, the individual knows that they cannot survive a fall from that altitude. When performing the actual jump the individual will be forced to cope with this perceived threat to life and perform certain active measures in order to successfully master the situation (Breivik, Roth, & Jørgensen, 1998).

However, since the rationale behind parachute training is to present as an extreme environment as possible within ethical limits, not all individuals will be able to complete the training. We often find that individuals will refuse to perform and that highly stressful situations will produce a rich variety of coping strategies (Bartone & Hystad, 2010).

The individuals who undergo military parachute training are selected, highly competitive individuals within an organizational culture that puts a premium on success and winning with a "failure is not an option" mentality, where failure has sometimes been regarded with contempt even in peacetime training (Soeters & Boer, 2000). Since the earliest studies on the subject, the considerable role of military parachute training as a means for self-improvement has been in contrast to the possible negative effects of being labeled as a "quitter," lacking the necessary skills as a soldier (Kepecs, 1944). In such situations, individuals will sometimes try to avoid admitting shortcomings or failure out of shame and fear of missing opportunities or loss of social status (Flam, 1993). Trainees' own desire to accomplish the parachute jump, win their wings, preserve the respect of their classmates, and gain that of the cadre make the fear of failure all the more acute (Basowitz et al., 1955).

Failure

Failure often causes a conflict between one's self-perceptions and the desired outcome. Generally, the individual will try to protect the self from the adverse consequences of failure by using specific coping techniques so that when failing, a ready excuse for failure exists that does not imply lack of ability (Martin, Marsh & Debus, 2001; Rhodevalt & Davison, 1986; Rhodewalt & Fairfield, 1991). Consequently, if the failure is unexpected and such mechanisms are not in place the reaction could be more severe.

When an individual is put in a context where failure could occur which would have adverse consequences, that individual will start to appraise the threat of failing specifically and sometimes even set goals related to avoidance (Martin et al., 2001). These methods are sometimes referred to as "self-handicapping" where the individual either makes the task harder for themselves thereby making it easier to blame the obstacles instead of oneself (for example over-emphasizing or actively escalating other social and contextual problems) or making up justifications for their potential failures such as injuries or physical symptoms (Rhodewalt & Davison, 1986; Rhodewalt & Fairfield, 1991; Rhodewalt & Hill, 1995).

The reaction to failure has also been argued to be related to an individual's way of thinking about, and reacting to, a perceived outcome, specifically the level of success orientation and failure avoidance (Covington, 1992, 1993). Highly successful individuals naturally have lower focus on avoiding failure and preparing for its implications, thus reacting more severely when they do fail, while in the same way those who have accepted failure even beforehand do not seem to have the confidence necessary to deal with challenges but will be better psychologically prepared for failing (Norem, 2001). In addition, an individual's way of coping with failure can also determine how they will handle similar or other tasks in the future. Beside the reactions of shame and embarrassment, the individual can also experience a reduction of self-esteem, questioning their future as well as being apprehensive about the social consequences such as potential loss of others interest or the risk of upsetting important others (Conroy, 2003).

The Present Study

Although failure can have severe consequences, especially in the life-and-death rationale of the military, few studies have focused on failures in extreme contexts such as parachute training. Previous studies on this type of training have primarily reported rates of failure only as a footnote or as one mediating factor in their analysis of the positive effects of those who successfully completed the same training (e.g. Basowitz et al., 1955; Sharma et al., 1994; Ursin, Baade, & Levine, 1978). Studies addressing failure more specifically have focused primarily on key requisites for success in extreme training situations and methods for lowering attrition rates (de Souza & Feitosa, 2015; Fitzwater, Arthur, & Hardy, 2018; Kiernan, Repper, & Arthur, 2015). Although being a common tool to build more capable soldiers and leaders, no known studies have more closely examined the reactions to and possible effects of failure in military parachute training. The purpose of the present study was therefore to study how trainees handle failures in an extreme setting within a military parachute training course.

Method

Research Design

The present study was explorative and inductive in design. The purpose was, in accordance with grounded theory method, to capture data from informants in the several ways described below and construct a model of the process of and reactions to failure (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data were collected over a three-year period on courses at the parachute ranger training school.

Participants were treated in accordance with human research principles and good research practices formulated by the Swedish Research Council (2017). Specifically, all participants were: (1) given *information* on the purpose about the aim and scope of the research at the introduction of each respective course; (2) informed about *consent* and voluntary participation as well as their right to at any time, without explanation, discontinue their participation and that

if they choose to do so any collected materials regarding them were then not used in the study; (3) informed about *confidentiality* of the collected data and that they were guaranteed anonymity; and (4) informed that the data collected were for a *specific use* and would not be used for any other purposes than the present research project. Since the researcher was also a military officer but present solely in a scientific role, it was emphasized that no data collected about the participants' individual performances would be reported to the Military Academy or in any way affect their future professional career.

Participants and Training Curriculum

Participants were 199 army and air force cadets from three consecutive classes of the Military Academy, conducting the parachute training course as part of their training curriculum in August of 2014, 2015, and 2016 ($N = 60$, 71, and 65 for each respective year). In addition to the cadets, teachers from the Military Academy who had not previously conducted the course participated all three years ($N = 1$, 2, and 1 for each respective year). In order to get a comprehensive approach, participant cadets, participant teachers, as well as instructors and commanders in the cadre were included in the data collection. This is in accordance with guidelines for qualitative studies where variation is desirable (Glaser, 1978, 2011; Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

The course was conducted over two weeks. Participants were accommodated at the training site and were relatively isolated during the duration of the course. All training facilities (classroom, training-hall, jump-tower, airfield, dining-hall, and accommodation) were located within a 2 km radius. At the beginning, the participants were divided into groups and assigned an instructor for the duration of the course.

The participants were given theoretical instructions in all aspects of parachuting as well as possible malfunctions. Besides theoretical classes, emphasis was on practical exercises where the individual is progressively introduced to the different elements of parachuting which was then gradually added in more complex drills and repeated meticulously. Besides the instruction directly related to parachuting, the entire course was conducted at a high pace with an emphasis on formal discipline, more rigorous than in other army units or the Military Academy, as well as physical preparation. Movements between training events were generally performed running in formation.

During the second week the participants were required to complete three separate mandatory safety tests required before being allowed to perform parachute jumps from an aircraft and complete the course. The tests were (1) a theoretical written test, (2) a suspended jump from a 12 meter high jump-tower simulating a stable exit from an aircraft, and (3) a landing-swing simulation of a parachute landing-fall where the individuals were required to perform a controlled roll designed to break the force of a parachute landing. Individuals who could not successfully complete any test were given supplementary instruction and a retry. Participants who failed a second time were removed from the course. During the three years of the study, thirteen participants were removed due to inability to meet the prescribed standards on the tests.

In addition, physical examinations were conducted at the beginning, and when needed during the duration of the course. With individuals where injuries (antecedent or related to the training) were considered a risk with the strains of performing a parachute jump, the regimental physician performed a more thorough medical examination. Overall, five participants were removed for medical reasons. Participants who were removed were handled on a case-by-case basis as to whether they should stay at the training site or leave.

Cadets who successfully completed the mandatory tests went on to perform parachute jumps from a military transport aircraft. They were then awarded the military jump-wings to wear on their uniform at the end of the course.

Data Collection

A major concern was to establish the role of the researcher (a military parachute-qualified officer) as a neutral part in the research setting. Participants were to be convinced that the interest in them was from a purely academic standpoint and that the researcher was in no way involved in any part of instruction or assessment. This was accomplished by participant observations and following the course 24/7, including, for example, accompanying all training activities as well as participating together with them in their first parachute jump, sharing accommodation in the barracks, eating together in the mess-hall, and spending free time in recreational areas at the end of the day. This reduced defensiveness and facilitated the establishment of rapport which enabled unconstrained access to informal conversations, both individually and within groups.

Focus during data collection was on those with difficulties or those that could for some reason not complete the training (total $N = 18$ for all three years). Since it would be practically and ethically impossible to increase the number of participants who failed, focus was on combining different methods of data collection (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Observations

One method of data collection was that of participant observations where the observer is a natural part of the training environment and documents events and observations of importance (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The 24/7 approach enabled observations to be made during training as well as leisure time. Specific focus was on evolutions

where participants showed greater difficulties, most notably the jump-tower where all participants were observed.

During the daily routine, field notes were taken. Observational notes varied from short notations that for example participant X did/did not show any difficulties in tower-jump number Y, to more thorough summaries from longer conversations. Observations were augmented by audio recordings of key events such as specific parts of instruction or tests. The recordings were then listened to again when compiling of the observations was done. Observations were summarized at the end of each day, and at the end of the course, to facilitate interpretations and analysis.

Interviews

In addition to the observations, twelve semi-structured interviews were conducted: eight with individuals who failed the course, two with teachers who participated together with the cadets, and two with instructors. Not all participants who failed wanted to participate or remained at the training site long enough after being dismissed from the course to get asked to do so.

The eight interviews with those who failed the course were done with the intent of capturing how they perceived and handled the adversity and failure. They were conducted between two and at a maximum eighteen hours after they had been dismissed from the course. For example, for those who failed the landing test at the end of the day the decision was made not to interview them late at night and in such close proximity to their dismissal, but next day at noon instead. The interviews were conducted in a permissive environment, in a part of the garrison not used in their training, with open-ended questions and only general efforts to guide questions into specific areas (Kvale, 1996). General themes covered were according to the sequence general–course–self: general questions regarding the participant's prior knowledge and initial impressions, questions regarding each specific part of the course, and finally the self and the individual's perception of their own performance, subsequently focusing on the part where they experienced difficulties. Follow-up questions were often such as "Tell me more," "You mentioned X, could you elaborate?" until saturation was reached. With teachers (who did not fail) and instructors, the themes were the same but focusing on the performance of participants. The interviews were recorded and lasted between 20 and 45 minutes and were then transcribed in order to facilitate the analysis.

Data analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed in full. The printed material from the observations and the interviews were then organized and categorized together and analyzed in accordance with grounded theory application (Glaser, 2011, 2015; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The first part was to perform an open coding, identifying units in each interview identified as having a specific meaning. An example of a code is given in the quote below.

> (From) NN1 with background in the ranger battalion and so on is expected some sort of "macho-thing" like this is something he is expected to manage, being failed in the (landing) swing is a big defeat when compared to a logistics officer.

This quote was coded as "Unit belonging," symbolizing social identity within the military. The second step was to organize the codes together with similar ones into overall categories. The quote and the code above were categorized with similar in the category "Mediators," describing mediating factors as to how individuals will perceive their failure.

Observations were coded in the same way as interviews. For example, an observation of an individual being over-eager to leave the training site and actively avoided confronting peers in doing so was coded as "Avoidance" and grouped in the category "Ways of coping." In addition, observations were grouped together with codes from interviews, adding further insight in the meaning of the code. For example, during one interview the participant mentioned "heights" fourteen times, attributing acrophobia for not meeting the prescribed standards on the test in the jump-tower, including one incident of a so called "jump-refusal" (cede to jump when being their turn). This statement was paired with that the individual had *not* mentioned such a problem in the initial health screening or in subsequent conversations. Further, observations from the jump-tower showed that although having indeed displayed a common height vertigo present with almost all individuals in the 12 m tower, the individual had not shown any of the more severe symptoms of pathological acrophobia (e.g., nausea, difficulty breathing, panic attacks, loss of bodily/bladder control, severe palpitations). This was finally contrasted with other observations of individuals who had reported acrophobia upon commencement of the course and shown all the above pathological symptoms but in contrast successfully performed jumps from the jump-tower. In this way, mainly out of observations, the code "acrophobic attributions" was defined as blaming a pathological fear of heights specifically for one's general inability to handle the situation. This was in accordance with Glaser's (2007) notion that all data are data, not just what is being said but also the conditions of it being said and all the data surrounding what is being told.

In the last step, the overall categories were paired together. Finally, when compared together two longitudinal "master themes" were identified, present in the majority of the categories. This generated the model presented in the results section below (Figure 1).

Throughout the analysis, awareness was maintained of the observer's possible influence on the participants' actions

and answers as well as the inherent assumptions in coding. Mitigation of this possible conflict was performed by letting a second researcher verify the model in this regard. Inter-rater reliability was further increased by choosing a person who had limited military experience and no experience whatsoever of the present training environment.

Results

The analysis resulted in the model presented (Figure 1). The model consists of three parts. The first is the reasons an individual can fail, which goes beyond what is stated in the

curriculum. Secondly, a number of mediators as to how individuals will perceive the severity of their failure were identified. The third and last part describes individuals' ways of coping with the same situation. These three parts all contribute to the master themes of decision aversion and externalization. Below, each part of the model is presented sequentially, finally leading to the master themes.

Reasons—To Which Non-Completion Can Be Attributed

The first category is the reasons an individual can fail, divided into four codes described below. The constructs in

Figure 1. The reasons for failure, mediators of individuals' perception of failure, as well as the ways of coping with failure after being dismissed.

this category are interdependent. This interdependency worked in two ways. First was the tendency to exaggerate somatic symptoms, inducing a medical withdrawal instead of risking failing to meet the prescribed standards in the tests. Second was attributing medical conditions to the inability to perform on the same tests. This is contrasted by the opposite, similarly common phenomenon where highly motivated participants tended to hide injuries or request medical assistance in order to be able to continue and complete the course.

Inability to meet the prescribed standards is the first formal reason an individual can fail. In order to complete the ground part of the training and proceed to making parachute jumps the trainee has got to pass the three parts (written exam, jump tower, landing swing). Participants who fail in any part are given supplementary instruction and a retest. Failure in the second examination leads to dismissal from the course. Due to the inherent strains of the course, success is in no way guaranteed. Or as one instructor put it:

> If you're not a professional athlete or something as some people this can be among the toughest thing they have done with their bodies, and with their minds as well.

Medical reasons are the second way an individual can be dismissed. Upon commencement of the course all trainees are asked to complete a health inventory. Individuals with more serious injuries (prior or sustained during the course) are examined by the regimental physician. If the physician concludes that the injuries are incompatible with the inherent strains of performing a parachute jump the trainee is dismissed from the course. The physician has decisive authority over medically related issues, meaning a removal for medical reasons cannot be overruled by the training cadre.

Voluntary withdrawal is the third way. The course is mandatory in the training curriculum; completion is however not required for graduation from the Military Academy. Although no such information is given at any point, individuals who report themselves unwilling to continue are first and foremost urged to move on, given supplementary coaching or training, but if the will is sustained, they are not forced to jump. During the three years one individual chose to withdraw and later chose to voluntary leave the Military Academy entirely.

Removed by instructors is the last way. If the instructors at any point feel that an individual is at risk of harming themselves and others, they have the ability to remove them from training, even if they have passed the formal tests required. During the three years of data collection one individual was removed during an examination and not given a chance to retrain and retry.

Mediators—The Individual's Perception of Failure

The individual's perceptions of and later reaction to failure are related to three mediating factors. These also affected the trainees' ways of coping in the last part of the model, for example that the most severe reactions tended to lead to the most successful coping described in active measures.

Unit belonging is the first mediatory factor, where reactions to failure have been related to perceived closeness between the participants' perceived social identity within the military and the paratroopers. For example, an individual destined for the Ranger battalion will react more severely than an individual from the Logistics branch since parachuting is perceived as closer to their part of their identity within the military profession.

Self-perception and previous experiences of failure means that the participants' reactions to failure have been related to previous experiences of failing. Individuals with few or no real previous setbacks have shown more severe reactions. Among high-achieving, highly competitive individuals, the experience of handling a failure of this magnitude is generally low. Simplified, they have never been forced to develop any strategies for coping with failure because they have never really failed before. This often manifested itself with surprise and anger. One instructor describes the severe reactions of one participant:

> This is probably the first time he has failed for real. I know the type. Competitive like hell and hates to lose.

Proximity of jumping includes that the reactions to failure have been more severe the closer to the actual jump it has occurred. Being dismissed during the first days of the course manifested milder reactions than being dismissed after failing the last test only hours before the first parachute jump. Since the system is designed to maximize the individuals' chances of succeeding, failures will more often come late in the process. One participant described this phenomenon as breaking a marathon with the goal in sight.

Ways of Coping

This category describes ways of handling failures after being dismissed from the course and for as long as observations were conducted, including management of participants from previous courses during year two and three of the study.

Active measures describe those actions taken in actively confronting and overcoming failure. These were characterized by introspection, individuals being aware of their own shortcomings, and that actions were taken to confront the

reasons rather than avoiding them. This is the only category where individuals have been problem-focused rather than emotionally focused and actively affected the cause of their failure. This strategy included individuals who after having failed a specific test insisted on carrying on and completing the rest of the course together with their peers (although being certain they would not be permitted to jump) in order to further challenge and develop themselves, often under the active support and positive peer pressure from comrades. Other measures also include practicing leaps from high ledges into a swimming pool and taking mountaineering classes after the course to overcome an irrational fear or phobia of heights. In two cases participants reported back on their own initiative to recycle and complete the whole course a second time, at that point performing flawlessly and completing successfully. In informal slang the mental attitude to overcome obstacles despite substantial difficulties was sometimes referred to as "Ranger the fuck up" (i.e., "Suck it up," "Stop feeling sorry for yourself," "Keep on moving"), acknowledging that everyone experiences the same difficulties to varying degrees but also that everyone possesses the mental resources necessary to overcome them. The individuals that have taken the most active measures have somewhat counterintuitively been the ones who have shown the strongest initial reactions of surprise and anger to their failure, indicating that the worst reactions bring out the most effective coping.

Dissociation is the described experiences of a mild detachment from intent and the body's reactions, including the body not obeying commands or the individual not being the one in command of their actions. Sometimes also a mild out-of-body experience, watching themselves performing safety-violating maneuvers such as reaching for the reserve parachute handle. One participant describes the experience:

> It's almost like it's not me who decides what happens, sometimes and only sometimes it goes well and sometimes it ends bad so that was a little more frustrating.

This is also described in being told by instructors that they have failed, recognizing the words said but not understanding them or experiencing them as being told to someone else (i.e., the other self they are observing).

Intellectualization refers to the process of removing oneself emotionally by relating to the experience rationally. This involves reflection of questions from personal to general (talking about the course in general when asked about their performance specifically), as well as questioning specific parts of instructions or the tests. An example is giving a critical review of the validity in specific examinations rather than one's performance on those tests.

Acrophobic attribution is holding a false or exaggerated pathological fear of heights responsible at least in part for one's general inability to handle the situation. The heights involved in training evolutions will create a common height vertigo and mild uneasiness in all normal individuals. However, several individuals attribute the acrophobia as the reason for not being able to perform the necessary procedures, despite having mentioned no such problem in the initial health screening or showing any such symptoms during training. In contrast, individuals showing clear signs of pathologic acrophobia performed better despite their problems. Similar to somatic injuries, having a phobic fear of heights (being not entirely under the individual's control) is a more permissible excuse than not possessing the required skills (being entirely under the individual's control).

Advantageous comparisons refer to the process of reframing the comparison of one's achievement from the whole class to only others that failed, simplified: "at least I wasn't worst of those who failed." This also included the division of the present task into sub-categories, which had been successfully completed before (e.g., enduring strenuous discipline and running, having flown military transport aircraft, performed tandem-jumps). The advantageous comparisons are done in order to redefine the frame of comparison in order to put oneself in a more advantageous position and thereby maintain a more positive self-image.

Indifference refers to both a lack of caring about one owns achievement as well as a disinterest in what completing the course could have given them. This includes a "motivational Catch 22": claiming to be convinced beforehand that the course would not teach them anything about themselves but arguing they would have been more motivated to complete the course (and performed better) if it would have taught them something about themselves. Indifference in this regard is not being under-stimulated or not challenged but rather being aware of not possessing the level of skill required to confront a task and as a result reducing or abstaining from adding value to that task. Simplified, by not adding value to something an individual will by definition not be disappointed when they do not succeed at it.

Arrogance and anti-authoritarian contempt refer to a superior attitude in making presumptuous claims and references regarding the course and a general lack of respect for the pedagogy used. One participant expresses:

> I think that they [instructors] are pretty silly […] like "oh you must be hard" [growling imitating instructor, then laughing out loud]. I don't really know what to do with that information.

The anti-authoritarianism was manifested primarily against instructors (although not told to them directly). But it was also observed against peers, jokingly mocking their acceptance of the same authority in informal settings during the course, for example when shining their boots

meticulously in the evening or testing each other on the theoretical aspects required to be memorized. The purpose in this regard is not an inherent attitude against the whole military system (they have after all volunteered to the Military Academy) but rather to reduce the value of the present task. If the individuals can persuade themselves (and others) to devalue the achievement of completing the course then the emotional effects of not doing so will naturally be smaller.

Avoidance refers to both psychically and psychologically creating distance between oneself and the phenomenon as well as the ones associated with it. This includes leaving the training site as immediately as possible after being dismissed, and subsequently avoiding individuals associated with such training. This way of coping manifested itself primarily with individuals who had shown relief when being dismissed. It also encompasses avoiding certain topics of discussion by reflecting discussions from individual to general (for example answering questions about their performance with a monologue about something else) or avoiding the topic in peer-to-peer conversations. One participant introspectively describes the manifestation of conversational avoidance when returning to the barracks late at night after failing a retry at the final test:

> For some reason it becomes a slight awkward atmosphere, then I don't know what I should say or they what they should say, and I try to explain to them that "it's okay"…It becomes an awkward situation a few seconds per individual.

Master Themes

Two master themes were identified as overarching the model, meaning they add further explanation of the categories described above and the presence of a larger phenomenon in the majority of them. Both master themes are concerned with protecting the self in order to minimize shame and guilt.

The first master theme was that of *decision aversion*, the tendency to displace decision-making in order to protect the self and minimize guilt and shame. Individuals will to a large extent avoid making decisions regarding their own failure. Refraining from making the decision themselves allows the individual to preserve a more positive self-image and save face in front of peers. This can be seen in the formal reasons, where it is more permissible to be removed than to quit by one's own decision. Attributing medical symptoms (being out of the individual's control) is a more socially acceptable reason for failure than inability to meet the required standards (being completely and only under the individual's control). Individuals who had somehow anticipated not completing the course but without having the strength to say so themselves often showed relief when

removed. One participating teacher summarized this as not having the strength to complete the course but neither the strength to admit to others (or themselves) that they would be unable to do so:

> One cadet was very relieved that someone else took the decision for them. And that is to say did not have the strength to get through and neither the strength to say "No, this is it, I've reached my limit."

Further, decision aversion was somewhat contradictorily demonstrated in the category of avoidance where the individuals showed a clear will to leave the training site but would rather have someone in a position of authority make the decision for them; wanting to leave but wanting someone else decide they should leave. This was manifested regardless of the reason for being dismissed. One participating teacher from the Military Academy motivates his decision of forcing individuals removed from the course to decide for themselves whether to leave the training site or stay with their unwillingness to make their own decision in handling the situation, and forced them to actively choose even if that choice included avoidance behavior:

> It was like a mark of shame on their forehead, and I understand them…They wanted to leave as soon as possible. (But) A choice is a learning situation, like "I have to make a choice and live with it," and that is why they got to make the decision. Otherwise I would have made it too easy and made the decision for them to stay and watch.

Externalization is the second master theme. Individuals will generally externalize (attribute to causes outside the self) before internalizing in order to protect the self. In categories referring to locus of attribution this can be seen in the use of external reasons such as somatic symptoms or acrophobia for making the goals unobtainable instead of internal reasons for not reaching them. For categories at the individual level, attempts are made to displace focus from internal reactions to external factors, manifested in for example the reflection of questions from personal to general in the category of over-intellectualization or the dissociation experienced by some, with its mild externalizing detachment from their own body and its performance. For categories at the social level this is manifested also in categories such as indifference (claiming the goals as irrelevant rather than oneself as unable), with arrogance and anti-authoritarian contempt (devaluing the training and the performance of peers rather than evaluating self-performance) or advantageous comparisons (reframing and comparing as favorable against others who failed rather than admitting one's own performance as substandard).

Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to investigate how trainees handle failures in an extreme setting within a military parachute training course. From previous research we know that parachute training presents as much strain as can be applied to a person within ethical limits (Fenz, 1975) and that extreme training situations will present a variety of coping strategies (Bartone & Hystad, 2010). The strong reactions and rich diversity in ways of coping in the results confirm this.

Several of the categories are in line with previous general research on failure and what is referred to as "self-handicapping" (Martin et al., 2001; Rhodevalt & Davison, 1986; Rhodewalt & Fairfield, 1991). Several categories as well as the master theme of externalization are directed at producing excuses for failure that do not imply lack of ability. Granted, we cannot tell if excuses such as acrophobia or somatic symptoms are completely made up, as sometimes described as being the case in previous research (Rhodevalt & Davison, 1986; Rhodewalt & Fairfield, 1991), or decided as excuses beforehand (Martin et al., 2001). As noted earlier, both physical fatigue and strain as well as height vertigo are after all natural to the training environment. But the results support that they are exaggerated regarding their impact on the outcome.

The two master themes summarize the main findings concerned with protecting the self in order to minimize shame and guilt. That the main part of the identified ways of coping is concerned with external factors rather than internal is consistent with previous research regarding a self-serving bias and the need to maintain a positive self-image (Mezulis, Abramson, Hyde, & Hankin, 2004). Specific to failing in a military context, previous research also supports the master theme of decision aversion and that individuals will sometimes use medical discharge as a socially acceptable lifeline at least in part to be allowed to save face in front of peers (Basowitz et al., 1955).

Further, the social aspects of the results are interesting in several ways. As mentioned, military cultures often harbor a "failure is not an option" mentality and individuals within such organizations are highly competitive, with failure regarded as more unacceptable than in civilian organizations (Soeters & Boer, 2000). The results are ambiguous in this regard. First, the findings support that failure in military settings is indeed emotionally charged. The strong reactions from those who fail and their tendency to avoid decisions or externalize reasons for their failure support that failure is indeed connected with strong feelings of shame and guilt. On the other hand, no indications show that peers should consider someone a bad individual or label them as "quitters" (Kepecs, 1944) solely for failing the course. On the contrary, the active support and positive peer pressure displayed from comrades indicate the exact opposite as well as the results that the worst reactions bring

out the most successful coping. The saying "Ranger the fuck up" that was sometimes used was not observed as a means to degrade someone's performance as substandard, but rather acknowledge that the difficulties they experience are to some extent experienced by everyone and reinforce a belief with the individual that he or she possesses the mental resources to overcome them, even if and specifically when they do not believe so themselves. Consequently, a "failure is not an option" mentality might be more connected with individuals' preconceptions than social or institutional expectations. One suggestion for future research could be to examine how individual perceptions and organizational cultures affect motivation and performance in this type of extreme military training.

There are several ways the present findings could be used in both civilian and military practices. As of present, the Swedish armed forces have no structured way to deal with individuals who fail in this type of training specifically, and follow-ups are made more on an ad-hoc basis on individual initiatives. This question can be divided in a motivational and a practical aspect. First, there is no one assigned to mentor or coach individuals who fail in how to turn that failure into a positive learning experience. Previous research suggests that self-compassion, and an accepting approach to personal failure in turn make individuals more motivated to improve themselves (Breines & Chen, 2012; Neff, Rude, & Kirkpatrick, 2007). The need for this type of follow-up is motivated further by the rationale of the military context and the simple fact that succeeding or failing in combat could affect the life and well-being of oneself as well as others. A systemized program for follow-up could possibly help individuals turn a failure into a positive learning experience. The second aspect is that the practical possibilities to come back and complete the training a second time in order to make remedies to one's reputation or self-esteem are limited, to not say lacking. Encompassing both these factors in a systematic follow-up of individuals who fail would possibly, not only in this extreme type of training, mitigate the negative effects of failure described.

Further, although parachute training is perhaps the most prevalent example of preparing individuals for the extreme strains of combat, it is not the only one. Others are for example boxing (Samuels & Gibb, 2002), combative training (Morales-Negron, 2009), survival training (Schmied et al., 2015), and scuba-diving (Colodro-Plaza, Garcés, López-García, & Colodro-Conde, 2015). They share similarities in that they present a perceived threat to life that requires active mastery and are all used in some part to prepare individuals for the stress of functioning under extreme contexts. Presumably, under similarly extreme contexts individuals will also fail, emphasizing the need for follow-up of individuals who fail in those settings as well. Further, military personnel are not the only ones working under extreme conditions, and numerous professions like law-enforcement,

emergency services, or rescue workers could benefit from similar kind of training.

The deficit of research in this crucial area could have several explanations. Firstly, maximizing the chances for success is arguably the best approach, making research into identifying those factors that do so more prominent. However, despite optimizing individuals' chances some will still fail, at the present course or others like it, making such research equally crucial. Secondly, methodological barriers make such studies harder (after all, studying failures is easier in an office than at the end of an open rear ramp of a military aircraft in flight). Thirdly, full unrestricted access to strong military collectives or hazardous activities such as parachuting is not always given to civilians.

The main limitation with the present study is the number of respondents and consequently possibilities of generalization. Granted, the present results do not allow any definitive conclusions to be made before being validated in specific parts and contexts by further studies. On the other hand, this was not the goal. The limitations in number of respondents is not a scientific but an actual one, being made from the number of individuals undertaking the training during the number of years the study was conducted, not the chosen scientific approach. Rather, the approach chosen had the clear advantage of in-depth access granted to this specific and extreme type of training as well as that it produced insight in to the meaning of versatile and qualitative data. Further, Glaser himself warns about data overwhelm in collecting too much data and the quality of the data to be more imperative than the number of interviews (Holton & Walsh, 2016).

The present study has not discussed differences regarding gender or other demographic variables. The data simply have not indicated any such categories in the analysis, for example being a mediatory factor. The gender distribution of those who failed was roughly equivalent to that in the Military Academy as well as the whole Swedish armed forces. Although the present data do not allow any conclusions to be drawn, such factors could be relevant to pursue in further research.

There is always an ethical balance in studying this type of phenomenon. The research principles formulated by the Swedish Research Council (2000, p. 41) specifically call for caution in studying individuals in emotional crisis. This is certainly the case in the present study, for some individuals perhaps being the most uncomfortable experience of their life so far. However, the same principles also state two requirements for such research to be conducted: firstly that the goal of the research conducted should be to attain knowledge relevant to the present group, and secondly that other groups are unavailable in studying the same phenomena. Since this type of military training is not given to outsiders, and that the present research was performed explicitly in order to improve the training conducted, both requirements are arguably met.

For further thought and studies, it is also worth pointing out that the value in special training or symbols such as jump wings—indicating special knowledge, skills, or abilities—by its definition as "special" implies being distinguished by some quality not possessed by everyone and therefore requires the exclusion of others. In some ways, value is added with uniqueness and maintaining standards, where the inclusion of everyone would devalue the achievement. This is not meant as an argument to sacrifice some in order to make the others feel better, but an acceptance of the possibility that, although rigorous selection is employed, both parachuting and combat represent extreme contexts which place equally unyielding demands on the individual and everyone willing (despite being told to "Ranger the fuck up") might simply not be suited to succeed.

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