

The Impact of Military Mobility Requirements on German Soldiers and Their Families

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1 The Problem

To a particularly high extent, the Bundeswehr are being dependent on the soldiers' mobility. This is not only due to the practice of rather regular reassignments of temporary-career volunteers and regulars in the course of personnel management and duty-tour orientation, but also to frequent deputation to training courses and deployments to missions. The strains caused by all these facts have been influencing the attractiveness of the soldierly profession in a negative manner as well as constituting one of the reasons for the Bundeswehr's growing problems in gaining qualified young people as servicewomen and servicemen.

Restructuring measures in the troops related to the *Bundeswehrreform* are currently accompanied by a very high frequency of reassignments. Disbanding of units and abandonment of garrisons have been effecting even those soldiers who, either for family reasons or other motives, in fact did not expect being reassigned any more. As a consequence, we have to start out from the supposition that a growing ratio of the soldiers reassigned will not relocate together with their families to the new garrison but decide to commute between domicile and garrison. Thus, the anyhow high mobility-caused strain factor effecting many soldiers and their families menaces to skyrocket again.

2 Objective of the Survey

In order to elucidate the extent of strain impacting on the soldiers and their families subject to reassignment, thus to facilitate decisions with regard to social support measures, the Federal Ministry of Defense entrusted, in autumn 2001, the Bundeswehr Institute for Social Research (SOWI) with an empiric survey on this problem field.

Apart from specific survey items with particular regard to the problem group of commuters, the inquiry aimed at getting answers to the following questions:

- Which are the particular strains arising for soldiers and their families from the military mobility requirements? How do these strains influence the factors job satisfaction and life satisfaction?

In the following, the findings with regard to these questions will be briefly represented and explained.

3 Survey methods

In October 2001, SOWI carried out a representative poll by mail among soldiers subject to reassignment, and their wives/life companions. The group of 'hardest-hit' persons encompassed those temporary-career soldiers and regulars (starting from six-year enlistees and rank 'sergeant') being married or living in a life companionship and effected by a reassignment to a new garrison in the years 2000 or 2001. The Ministry provided the addresses required which had been chosen from the payroll by means of an automatic random program. With a total of 3,267 questionnaires mailed, the sample covered about every fifth soldier of the Bundeswehr meeting the selection criteria.

A detailed questionnaire, accompanied by another one for the wife/live companion concerned, was mailed to every chosen respondent. Apart from a brief explanation of the poll's purpose and a guarantee of strictly respected anonymity, the covering letter read particularly the request for filling in both questionnaires separately and to return them as soon as possible.

All the questionnaires having returned in a filled-in state until mid-November 2001 took part in the evaluation, namely 1,336 questionnaires of soldiers and 1,161 one of wives/life companions. Compared with the number of respondents mailed, this runs up to a return ratio of 40.9 percent. The following *Table 1* reflects the repartition of the return between the different rank categories.

Table 1: Questionnaires evaluated (return)

Rank category	Questionnaires mailed	Quest. returned (N)	Quest. returned of wives/comp.	Return ratio of N
Senior NCO	1,400	470	393	33.6 %
Officer CI	233	128	122	52.4 %
Troop officer	1,400	603	516	36.9 %
Officer GS/AS	187	119	115	61.5 %
General/Admiral	47	16	15	34.0 %
Total	3,267	1,336	1,161	40.9 %

5 Descriptive criteria of the sample

In compliance with the definition of 'hardest-hit' soldiers mentioned above, the sample covers preponderantly regulars (78.6 %). Temporary-career soldiers are represented with significant ratios only among the rank categories of senior NCOs and troop officers (24.8 %/27.7 %).

About every second soldier participating in the evaluation belong to the army forces (50.6 %). Correspondingly, there is a slight over-representation of air force (38.8 %) and navy (10.5 %). Just shortly half of the respondents currently do troop service (45.5 %), the remainder belonging either to central military agencies, higher staffs, Bundeswehr schools, or other agencies and offices.

As for the age, the sample covers preponderantly those soldiers belonging to the middle and higher age groups: only every fifth (19.6 %) are not older than 30 years but even every fourth (25.5 %) are 46 years or older; the significant majority (54.9 %) thus belong to the age group between 30 and 45 years. As to be expected for this age repartition, about 84 % of the soldiers are married whilst about 16 % indicated being widower or divorced. The majority (54.0 %) of those non-married soldiers also live in a firm companionship.

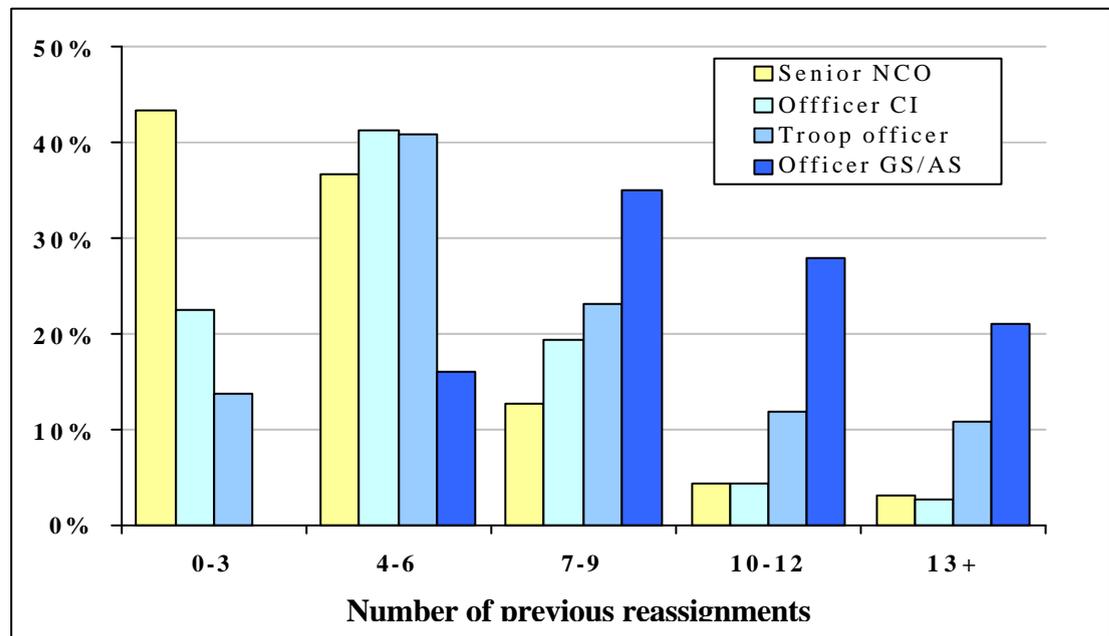
53.1 % of the respondents indicated to live without any children in their households, 19.3 % with one child, 20.8 % with two and 6.8 % with three or more children.

6 Survey results

6.1 Reassignment frequency

In average, the soldiers interviewed experienced 6.5 reassignments in the course of their service period, a standard deviation of 4 given. But there are significant variations in the reassignment frequency versus age, rank category and appointment of the soldiers concerned. The Graph 1 below shows that senior NCOs are significantly less affected by reassignments than officers are. As it could be expected, senior officers in general staff duty are the ‘hardest hit’ respondents: none of them was affected by less than four reassignments whilst the majority even experienced eight up to ten.

Graph 1: Reassignment frequency (in %)

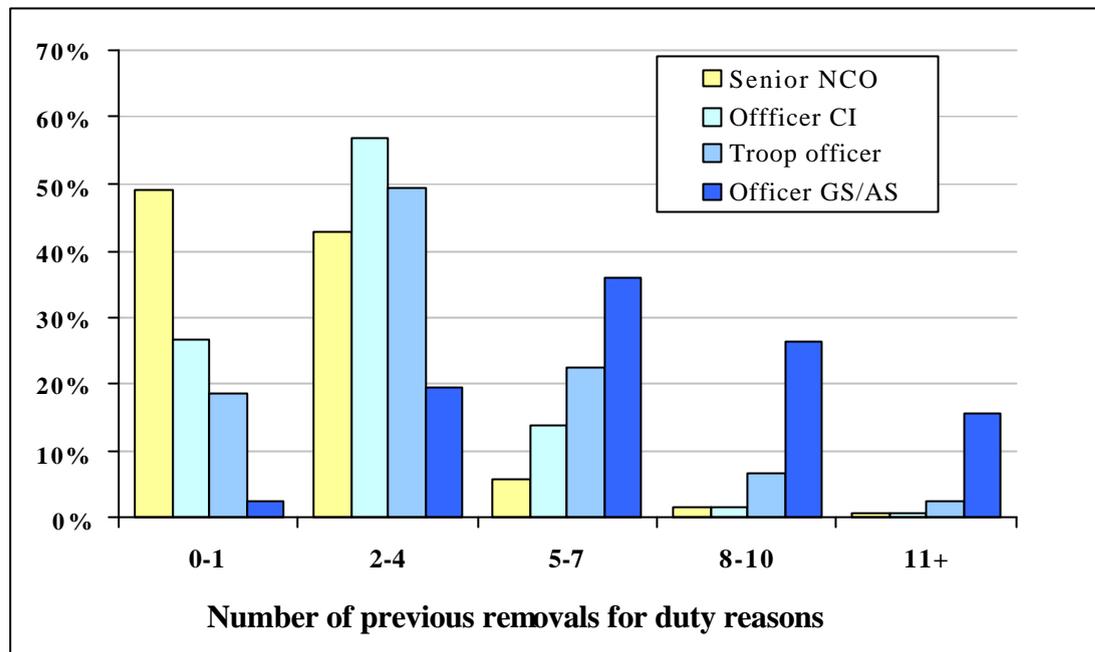


6.2 Removal frequency

Even for married soldiers, every reassignment does not consequently lead to a removal. Nevertheless, Graph 2 below shows that most of the interviewees had been affected several times by removals for duty reasons – there is an average of 3.4 with

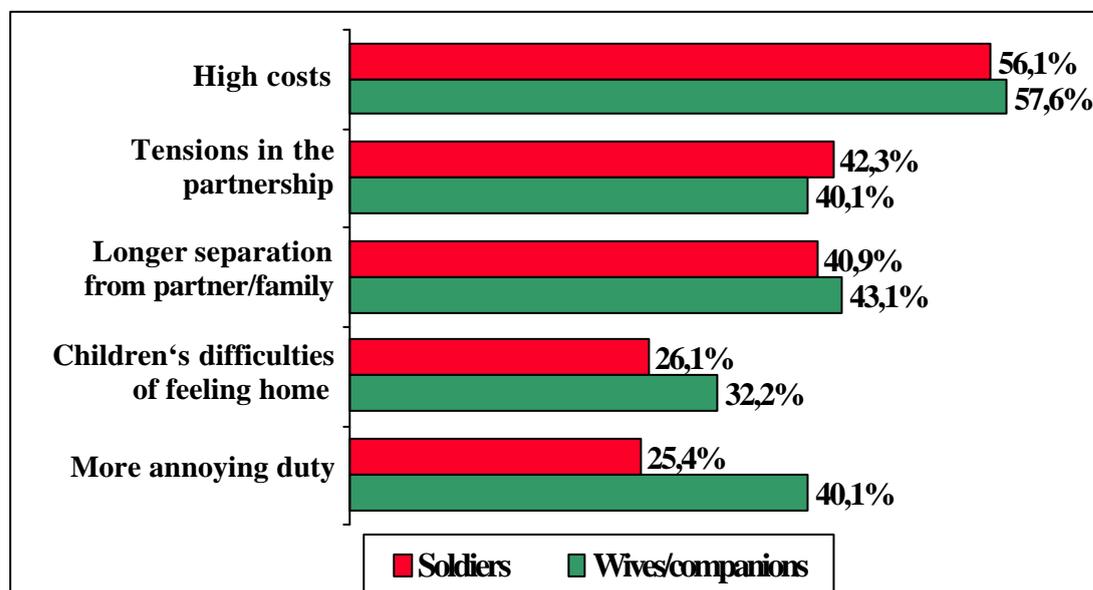
a standard deviation of almost 3. Analogously to the number of reassignments, general staff officers are the 'hardest hit' rank category. In spite of their relatively short duration of assignment, they are obviously rather willing to move.

Graph 2: Removal frequency (in %)



It is as plain as can be that not only the 'commuter's life' of soldiers affected by reassignments will lead to problems in the families and companions concerned. Further strain and tension factors also result from repeated removals, particularly from high additional costs, and from children's difficulties of feeling home. The corresponding problems were consistently often named by soldiers as well as wives/companions in answering the question of 'strain experienced with regard to the last removal'. These strain factors are nearly the same throughout all rank categories whilst their intensity generally grows together with the removal frequency.

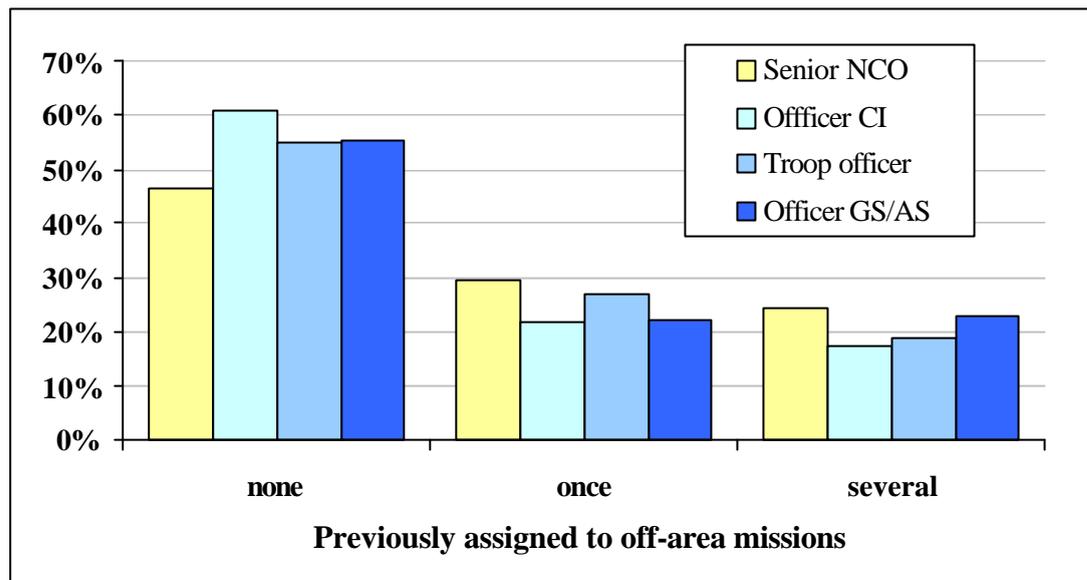
Graph 3: Strain arising from the last removal



6.3 Assignments to off-area missions

Almost every second soldier (48 %) did already participate in at least one off-area mission, most of them (37 %) in two of such assignments running up to a total duration of one year. About 5 % of the respondents indicated having taken part in particular off-area assignments for a duration of three and even more years. Contrary to the items of reassignment and removal frequency, NCOs are obviously more often affected by assignments to off-area missions than the different groups of officers.

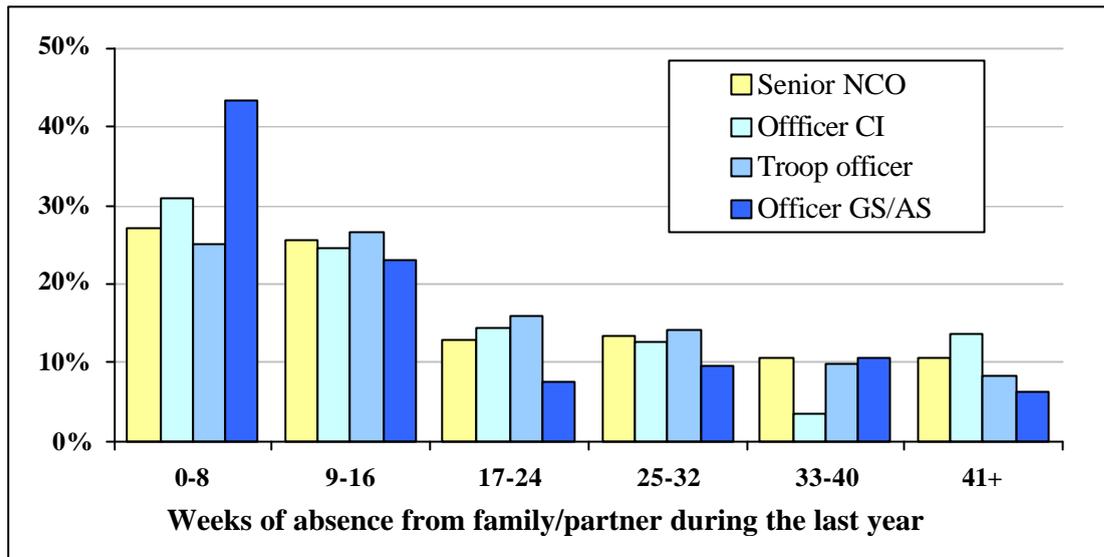
Graph 4: Assignments to off-area missions (in %)



6.4 Total of absence times

Taken all the soldiers of the sample, the duration of off-area assignments together with other duty-related times of absence from the family (e.g. training courses, exercises, mission preparations ...) sums up to a total average of nearly three years. As a consequence, about 90 percent of the respondents stated to live in much more mobility than their parents did. Graph 5 below also reflects these long periods of absence from the family, showing the number of weeks of separation from the family (or wife/life companion) during the 12 months preceding the survey. As indicated by the graph, the rank category of officers in general staff duty show less strain than the other categories. This fact is presumably due to their greater willingness to dislocate.

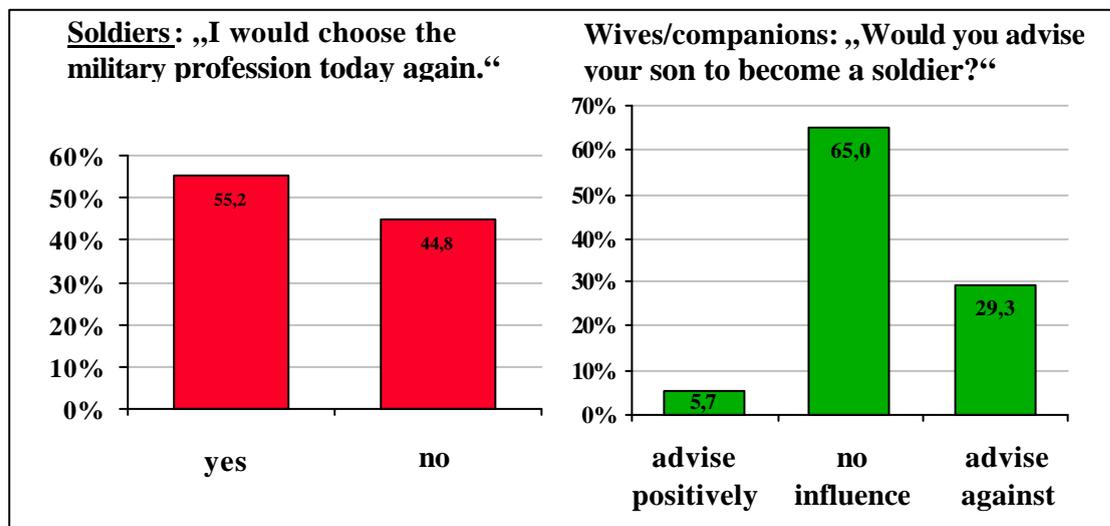
Graph 5: Weeks of separation from home (last year) (in %)



6.5 Attitudes towards the military profession

All the graphs above reflect significantly the high strain arising for soldiers and their families from the particular military mobility requirements. In the following, we will examine the extents of the impact on job and life satisfaction. The answer to the question “Seen all your experience made, would you choose the military profession today again, or would you prefer another professional option?” served as the examining criterion. The corresponding question for the wives/life companions read “Would you advise your son to become a soldier?”. The corresponding answers (see Graph 6) indicate that the basic attitudes towards the military profession are obviously subject to prejudice: Nearly every second respondent (44.8 %) meanwhile would prefer another profession. Only very few of the wives/companions (5.7 %) would advise their sons to take the same profession as their fathers did.

Graph 6: Basic attitudes towards the military profession (in %)



7 Calculations of coherence

7.1 Mobility requirements and tensions in the partnership

As already mentioned in chapter 6.3, strain charges due to removal remarkably often come along with tensions in the partnership. The latter are also the consequences of other military mobility requirements.

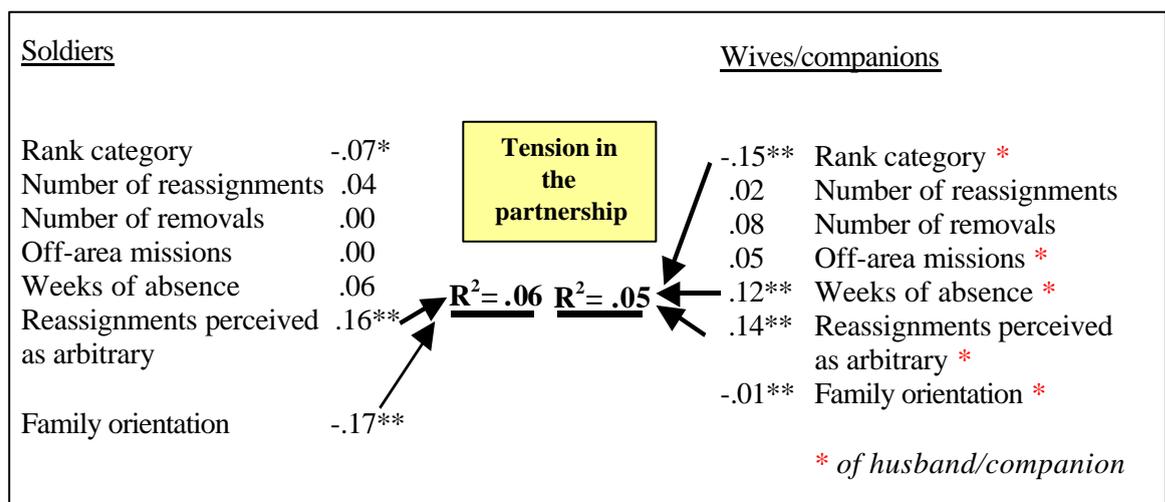
Tensions in the partnership do have focal importance for job and life satisfaction. The younger ones are particularly suffering from such tensions since they often do not master the corresponding response strategies.

In order to find answers to our focal question, we examined in a first survey step, by means of a multiple regression computation, to which extent tensions in the partnerships were due to the mobility strain factors described before (reassignment frequency, removal, off-area missions, weeks of absence). The answer to the item 'There are/were tensions in my partnership' here served as an examining criterion. As shown by *Graph 3*, 42.3 % of the soldiers and nearly the same ratio of wives/companions gave an affirmative answer.

In addition to the four mobility strain factors, we included the characteristics of rank category, family orientation and 'reassignments perceived as arbitrary' as further conditional factors (predictors) into the regression computation. These characteristics stand for the multitude of other influencing factors either supporting or disturbing job satisfaction. Their selection resulted from our impression that affirmative answers to the item 'The practice of reassignments is obscure and arbitrary' have a high declaration value for many other answer tendencies – as well as the (self-) evaluation of respondents 'being able to make profession and family compatible' or if the option is 'family first' or 'job first'.

The following *Graph 7* reflects the extent of the linear mathematical coherence of the 'tensions in the partnership' affirmed with the seven predictors included into the analysis, separated between soldiers and wives/companions.

Graph 7: Conditional factors of tension in the partnership



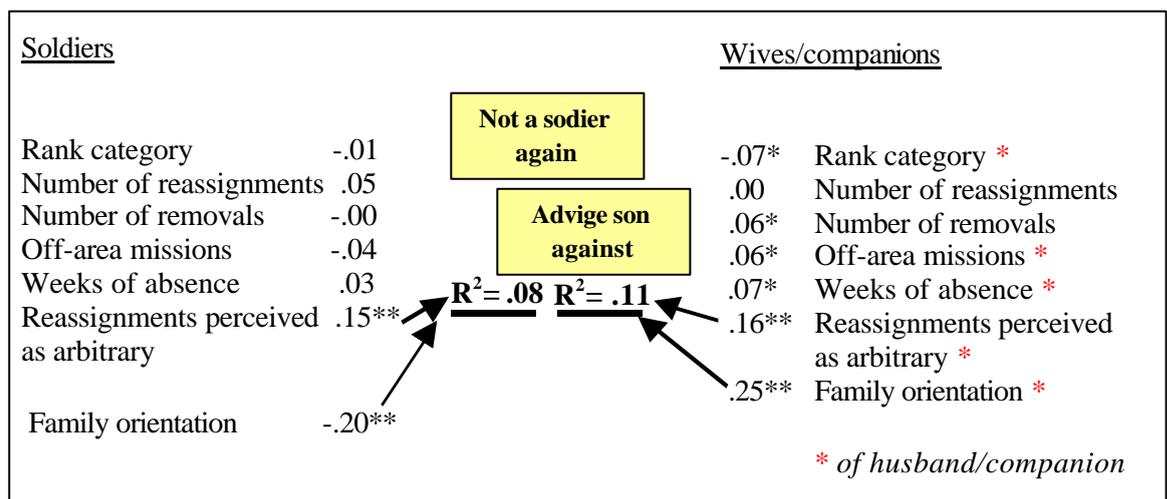
As shown by the graph above, all the seven examining criteria together explain only six (respectively five) percent of the variance of the criterion ‘tensions in the partnership’. This is an unexpected low value. Particularly surprising was the finding that three of the four mobility strain factors did not show any significant influence on the criterion: the corresponding ‘Beta weighing values’ are found in the single-digit range without statistical significance. Solely the variable ‘number of weeks of absence last year’ reflects for the soldiers a statistical important coherence with the affirmation of tensions in the partnership. Even stronger, however, are these coherence values for the factors of rank category and number of reassignments. For the wives/companions, affirmative answers to the tension item obviously depend from the extent of the husband’s/companion’s family orientation.

7.2 Mobility requirements and attitudes towards the military profession

In a further survey step, we examined in the same manner the coherence between the answer tendencies mentioned in chapter 6.5 (‘not become a soldier again’ or ‘I would not advise my son to become a soldier’) and the mobility requirements experienced.

The findings (see *Graph 8* below) are nearly completely identical with the preceding survey step: the presumed mobility strain factors just show neglectable influence on the basic attitudes towards the military profession, i.e. there is no significant coherence with the reservations made. From all the examining criteria included, only the items ‘family orientation’ and ‘reassignments perceived as arbitrary’ reflect such a coherence. As shown by the multiple determination coefficients of .08 and .11, however, there is only very few influence on the basic attitudes towards the military profession.

Graph 8: Conditional factors of attitudes towards military profession



8 Résumé and evaluation

The findings elucidate that the various – and in their extent very important – mobility requirements on the soldiers interviewed have nearly no direct effects on their statements regarding job and life satisfaction. Affirmed deterioration effects are rather due to forms of individual response strategies (‘not able to make profession and family/partnership compatible’), but particularly to a great extent of dissatisfaction with the ways and manners of calling up this mobility which obviously often seem to be characterized by lacking information and planning security, additional costs, burdensome bureaucracy as well as by lacking measures of family care and support, as it is underlined by other survey findings. All these experiences taken into consideration, the real mobility requirements are obviously perceived as less burdensome.

We have to state, however, that these rather unexpected findings are certainly also due to the sample. Most of the respondents were regulars preponderantly belonging to a higher age group and superior rank category, thus they might have accepted and interiorized the military mobility requirements. They perceive organizational insufficiencies as burdensome. Similar attitudes and behaviors cannot be expected from the target group of young men and women which are so important for the personnel demand satisfaction.