

Sacrificing Self for the Mission: A Mixed Methods Analysis of Nutritional Fitness and Eating Behaviors Among Marine Corps Drill Instructors

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Disclosure

- The opinions and assertions expressed herein are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Uniformed Services University, the Department of the Navy, or the Department of War.
- The author/speaker has no conflicts to report

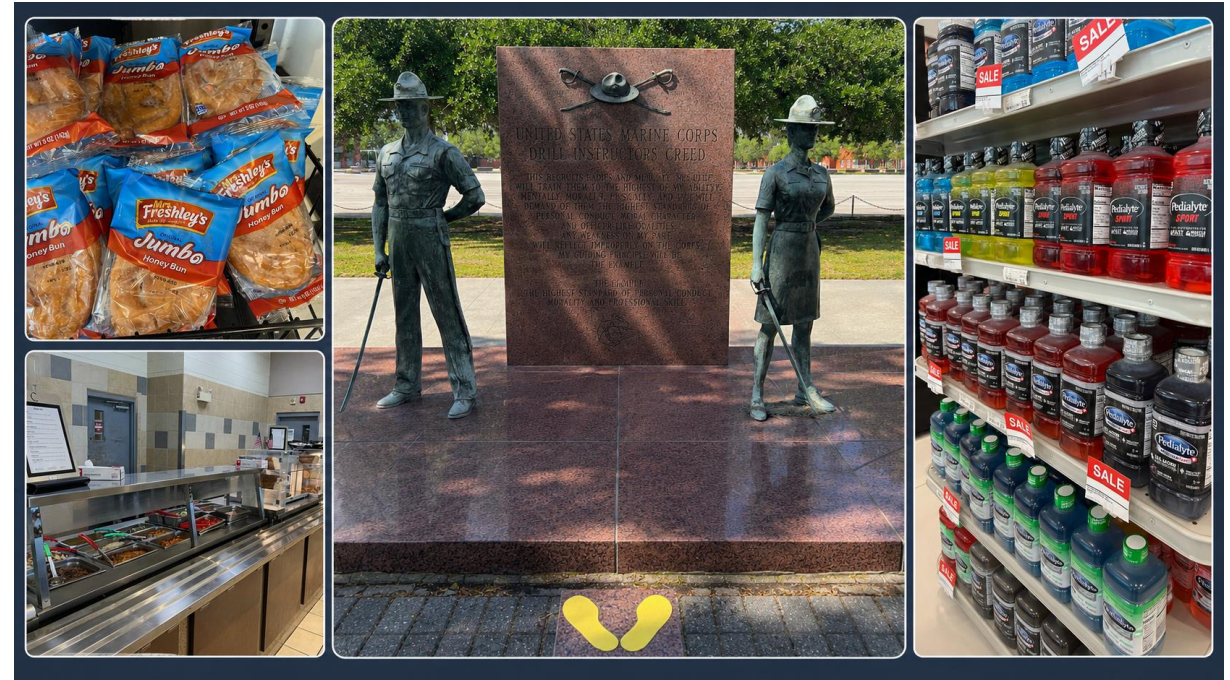
Welcome to MCRD Parris Island



“The DI is the central figure for recruits and the leadership bedrock upon which we base recruit training”
(DEPOT Order 1513.6H)

Problem: Operational Demands and Nutritional Risk Among Drill Instructors (DIs)

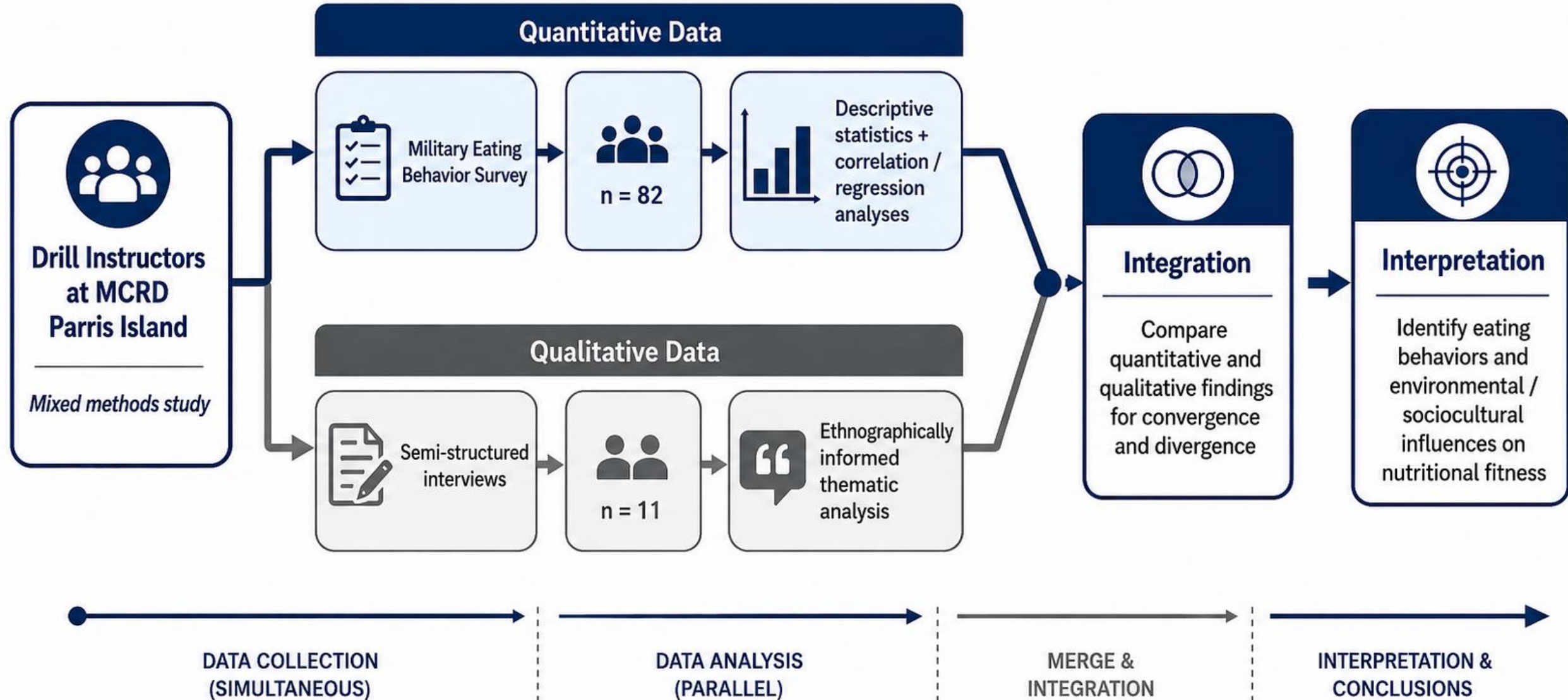
- **Operational Demands**
 - 13-week training cycles
 - 90-hour +work weeks
 - High physical and cognitive load
- **Performance Expectations**
 - The “Perfect” Marine
- **Nutritional Risks**
 - Convenience-based choices
 - Limited nutrition knowledge



Purpose

To understand the eating behaviors of DIs and the influences of those behaviors to improve DIs' nutritional fitness

Mixed Methods Parallel Convergent Design



Results

Participant Characteristics

Drill Instructor Eating Behaviors Study • MCRD Parris Island

SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

n = 82

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS

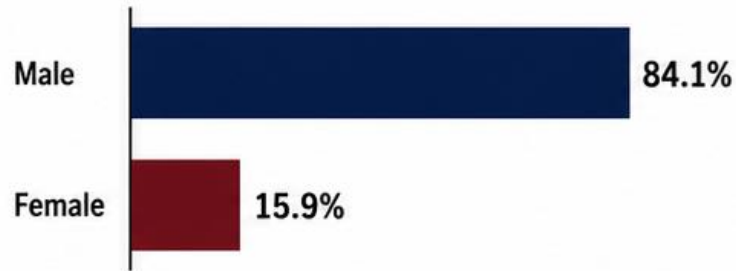
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AGE

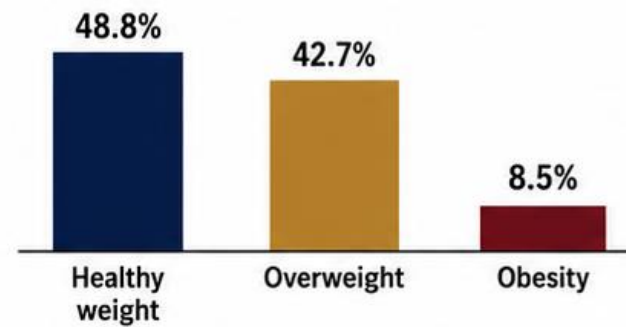
27.83 ± 4.89 years

29.4 years (25–39)
(Interviews)

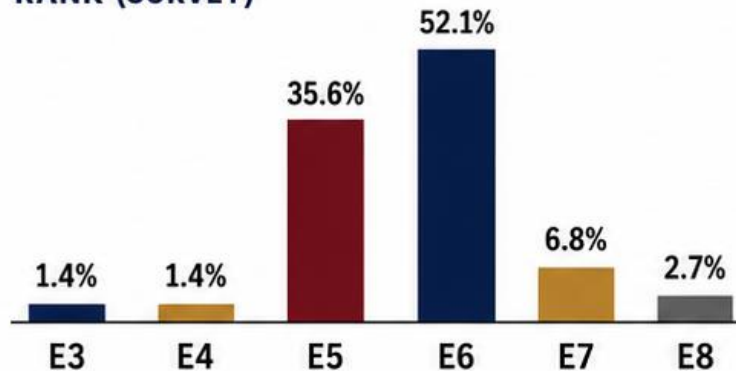
SEX (SURVEY)



BMI CATEGORY (SURVEY)



RANK (SURVEY)



SELECTED CHARACTERISTICS (SURVEY)

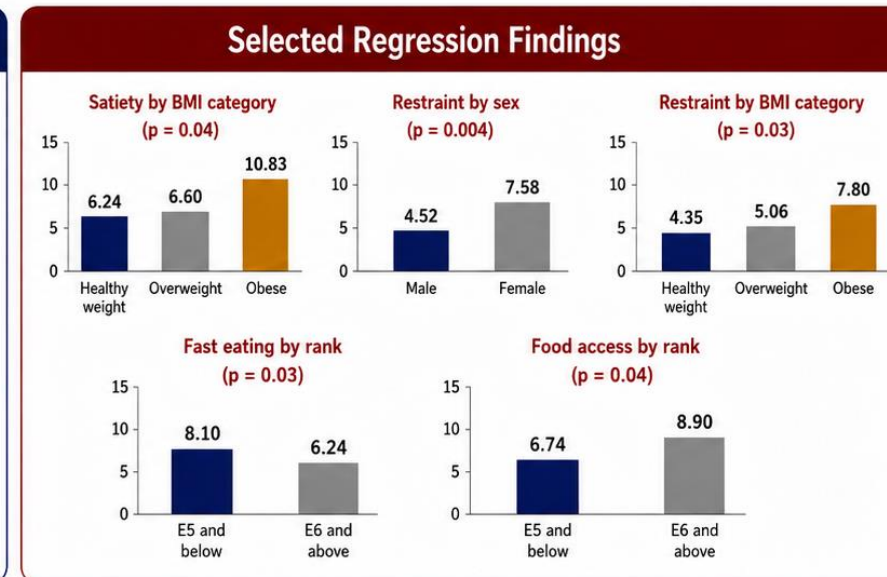
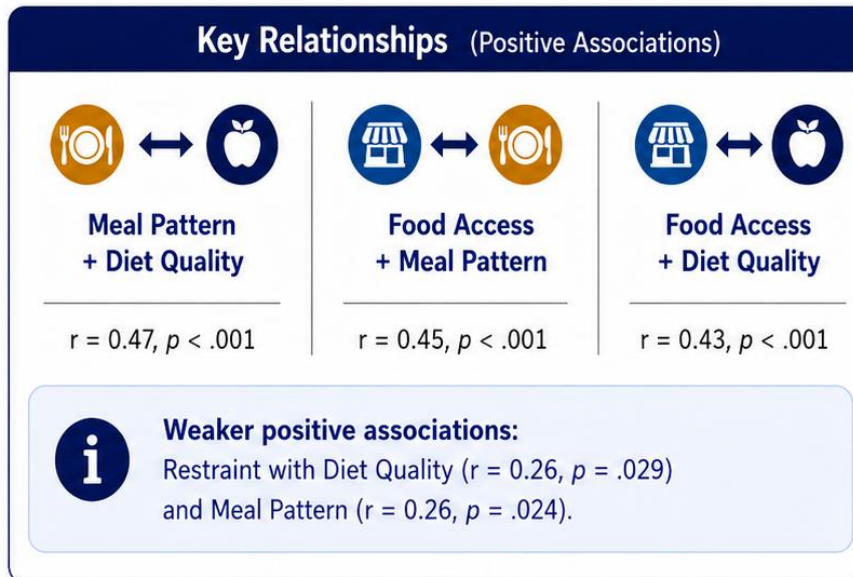
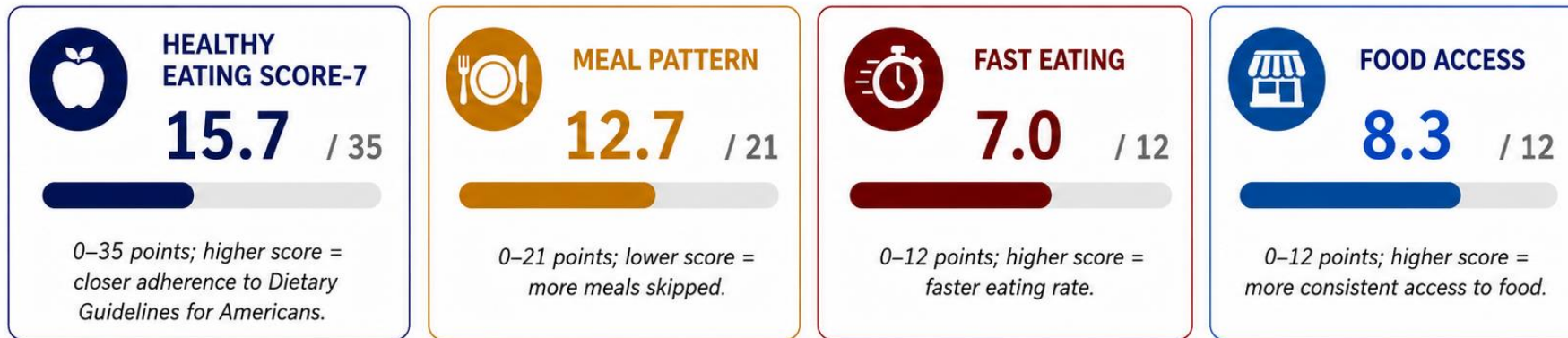
White	61.0%
Black or African American	24.4%
Hispanic descent (yes)	24.7%
Off-base housing/campus	75.6%
Married	59.8%

INTERVIEW CONTEXT

Drill Instructor cycles (mean) **4.8 (range 1–20)**



Eating Behaviors and Diet Patterns



Sacrificing Self for the DI Image

Qualitative Results



Sacrificing Self for the DI Image

- Mission and DI identity outweigh personal needs.
- Eating, drinking, and recovery may be hidden to preserve authority and mystique.

“

I do want you to think that I'm a machine, and I don't sleep and I don't eat. I liked the way that made me look as a drill instructor.”



Compromised Fueling

- Meals are rushed, inconsistent, and driven by time and access.
- Convenience foods and energy drinks replace planned, nutrient-dense fueling.

“

I think I tend to eat a little bit more healthier whenever I'm out of cycle ... cause I'm not in a rush or anything like that.”



Functioning in Deficit

- DIs work while underfed, dehydrated, sleep-restricted, and under-recovered.
- Depletion becomes normalized as “DI fit.”

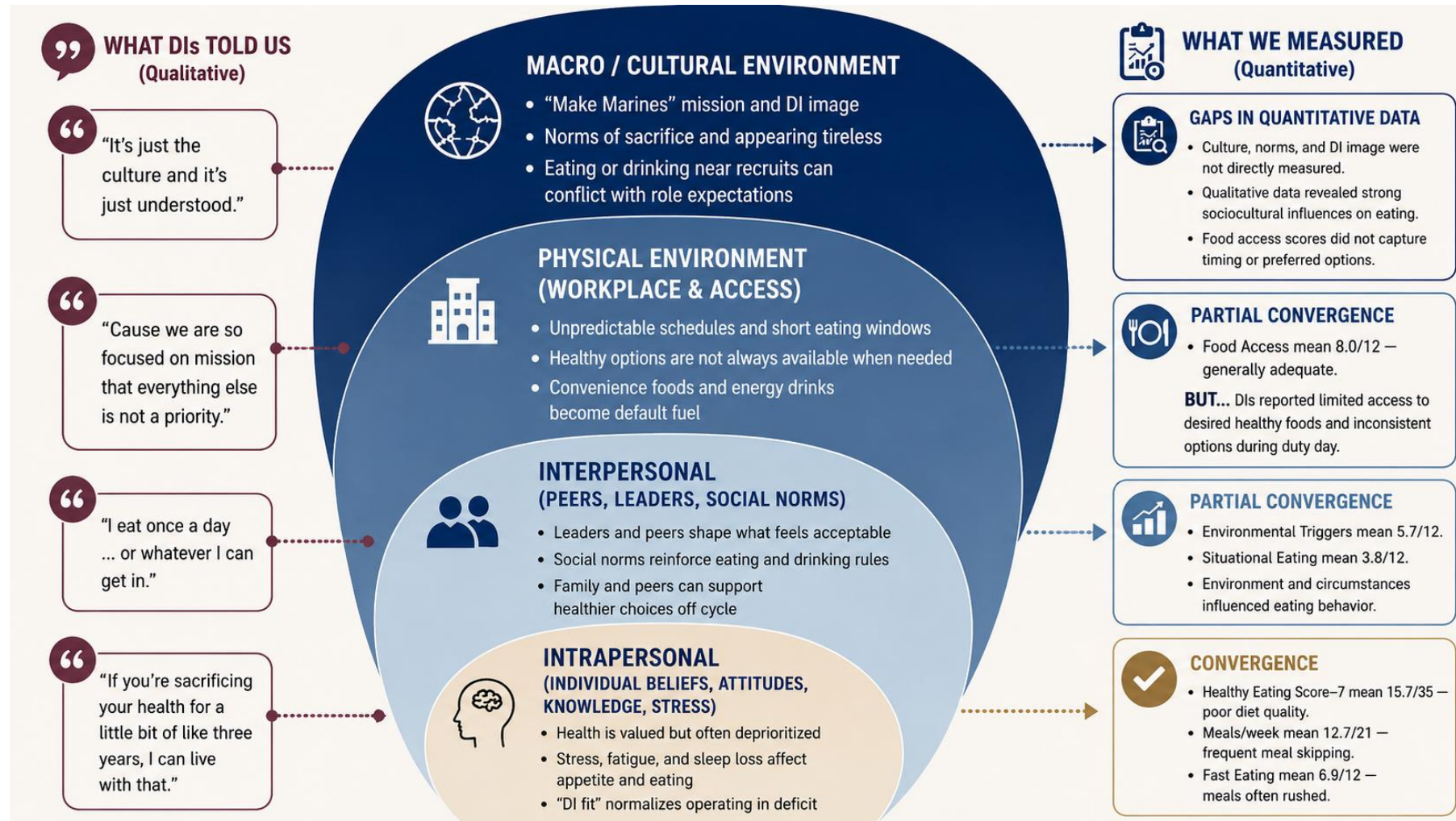
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“Two years ago, [if] you would have told me ... you're going to be sleep deprived, barely drink any water, and be required to do all these things, I [would have thought] that's crazy, but now it's like a normal Tuesday.”



Themes reflect how work demands, mission, and DI image shaped eating behaviors.

Culture and Environment Shape Eating Behaviors



Limitations

- Single-site Marine Corps recruit training context may limit transferability to other military Services with comparable DI roles.
- Participant experiences may not fully represent variation across companies, training phases, or duty status, particularly during the most intensive recruit-facing periods.
- Recall, social desirability, lack of formal member checking, and partial alignment between interview and survey domains may have limited interpretation and data integration.

Operational Implications and Future Direction

- Improve access to nutrient-dense foods that align with DI schedules and training cycles.
- Provide role-specific nutrition support for long duty days, recovery, hydration, caffeine use, and body composition demands using local or assigned registered dietitians.
- Engage leaders to normalize fueling, hydration, and recovery as performance behaviors.
- Pilot grab-and-go food options, targeted nutrition training, and leadership checks across one to two battalion cycles.
- Quantify DI energy requirements and evaluate cardiometabolic effects of chronic energy deficit, stress, sleep restriction, and ultra-processed food reliance.

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Research Team

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