

4 Emos: Probing the Hope of Conscribed Soldiers

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Total institutions create unique conditions that shape how emotional distress is experienced and cared for, yet only a few HCI studies have examined such conditions. Focusing on the South Korean Military, which operates care infrastructure primarily on accident prevention, we suggest *4 Emos*, a cultural probe to explore emotional experiences of conscripted soldiers in their own views. We hope this probe will reveal diverse pathways for designing technology-mediated care that moves beyond prevention framework.

CCS Concepts: • Human-centered computing → Human computer interaction (HCI).

Additional Key Words and Phrases: Keywords

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1 Introduction

Care of emotional distress has been an active CSCW research area. Studies have explored peer support design opportunities and diverse community platforms [10, 19, 25, 40], as well as caring agents like chatbots [2, 20, 26, 35].

Building on CSCW's tradition of examining institutional contexts [7, 17, 31, 43], researchers have analyzed power dynamics in digital mental health infrastructure, revealing how technology-mediated care is influenced by institutional contexts [11, 27–29]. Studies have described care ecologies, highlighting structural influences and marginalization while exploring alternative care activities [4, 13, 36, 37]. This has led to participatory efforts envisioning trauma-informed care [41] and designing safer technological spaces and places for vulnerable populations [32].

In the institutions that force individuals to *adjust to* strict rules and have limited rights, such as military units, convents, prisons, or mental hospitals, one's frame of emotional distress is significantly shaped by institutional systems. Goffman's concept of *total institutions* [6] describes how inmates' times and spaces are strictly planned and controlled for the single institutional goal and authority. They are guided to have identities aligned with institutional values through pursuing ideal values (e.g., patriotism or religious beliefs), reward-penalty system, microscopic surveillance, hierarchical rituals (e.g., salutes), restriction of personal equipment, and others. These institutions define *eligible emotions* based on official objectives, producing inmate identities that include specific emotional norms [38]. For example, soldiers often perceive mental health problems as blameworthy due to institutional stigma [1]. At the same time, inmates *adjust to* institutional life through diverse strategies. Finding free spaces, such as a church or a cafe, is a representative strategy where they find relief from strict rules. Despite these unique conditions, few HCI studies have examined care of emotional distress within *total institutions*, focusing mainly on former members [3, 4, 8].

As a case of emotional distress care in a *total institution*, we investigate the South Korean Military, which operates official mental health resources including *Green Camps*, *military life professional counselors*, and the *National Defense Help Call* (see Appendix A for detail). These systems, affected by tragic incidents like suicides or shootings, primarily

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aim to *prevent accidents* and help “*misfits*.” While important, this *accident-prevention* focus may constrain investigation of diverse *pathways to care emotional distress* critical for pursuing **hope** in design for conscripted soldiers [14, 15].

This paper presents an initial research idea to probe the emotional experiences of conscripted soldiers in South Korea, augmented with a cultural probe design (*4 Emos*) and diary entries from the first author’s lived experience as a current conscript. Through understanding soldiers’ emotional experiences, we aim to design alternative technological elements of military culture of emotion and care, moving beyond current focuses on *classification and prevention*.

We suggest the cultural probe method to facilitate soldiers’ *agentic expression of emotions*, but we note that future research **should consider** the dynamics of study within *total institutions*, resonating with calls for avoiding *blind hope*. Ways of ensuring agency and informedness of research participants and future users should be designed, carefully considering the potential risk of institutional surveillance and control of emotion.

2 Positionality Statements

South Korea operates a mandatory military conscription system requiring all eligible men to serve 18-21 consecutive months of active duty between ages 18-35. Only certain levels of disabilities, Olympic medals, or exceptional cultural achievements provide exemptions. The nation-wide agency, the Military Manpower Administration, evaluates approximately 300,000 people every year, determining about 80% as eligible (i.e. mandatory service) [53].

This research is led by the first author, currently a conscripted soldier working as a researcher at the Korean Military Academy. He has a background in HCI research for mental health care, making this study conducted with a dual identity of *researcher-soldier*. As a soldier, he faces strict hierarchical relationship and has a variety of obligations, such as strict restrictions on timetables, social encounters, personal equipment, and others. As a researcher, however, he has relative freedoms: office work, smartphone use, and research activities. This dual identity contributes to this research. Compared to other conscripted soldiers, while acknowledging that there is no single accurate representation of conscripted soldiers in general, the first author is homogeneous in terms of timetables and limited rights, but heterogeneous in terms of the responsibilities, work environment, and potentially the subcultures of military units. Additionally, he serves as a peer counselor who supports other *researcher-soldiers*. This identity facilitates access to the care system of the military, such as having encounters with expert counselors.

3 Probe Design

3.1 4 Emos: A Probe for Understanding Emotional Experiences of Conscribed Soldiers

Cultural probe [5] is a design method to understand the local culture and explore designs based on lived experience. Researchers send the probes as gifts, wait, and review the returned probes to find “inspirational” data. Their forms are diverse, such as postcards, maps, and hand-drawings [5, 12, 23]. Through their nature of escaping pre-established frames and discovering local culture, we use probes to explore emotional experiences of soldiers beyond institutional languages, inspired by previous probe studies revealing complex care ecologies [42] and emotional experiences [9].

4 Emos is a probe that has a form of a mobile note application with hand-drawing inputs (Fig 1 (a)). It includes date entry, four text inputs for emotion labels, and four drawing areas for sketches of related context. Icons of four seasons serve as metaphors for diverse daily emotions, reflecting South Korea’s distinct four seasons. The mobile app format is intended to reduce burden of writing emotional diary in shared places where conscripted soldiers rarely have privacy.

We plan to recruit conscripted soldiers who will receive the app on their personal smartphones for three weeks, recording four emotions and related drawings daily. Participants will then export data files, return them via messenger,

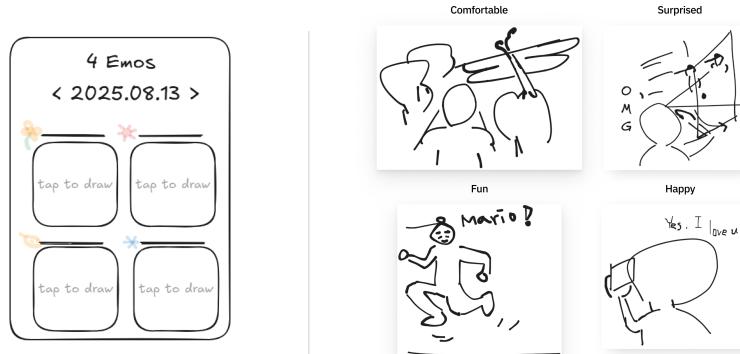


Fig. 1. (a) *4 emos*: A lo-fi prototype of a probe for understanding emotional life of conscripted soldiers. (b) Diary entries of the first author.

and participate in semi-structured interviews exploring the landscape of daily emotions and their individual, cultural, and structural contexts.

3.2 Potential Discussions from the First Author's Diary Entries

The proposed probe study has not been conducted yet. To speculate the potential impacts of such probe study, we present the preliminary pieces of the first author's diary entries (Fig 1 (b)), following the similar format of *4 Emos*. The specific four emotions in the figure are just examples. In the actual study, the participants can record their **own diverse emotions** (e.g., anxiety) and related drawings. The following discussions exemplify the emotional experiences in military life that can be explored through the probe and the consequent design implications.

The first drawing shows a person and a road full of trees and a dragonfly, associated with the label 'comfortable.' This drawing represents the relief from nature throughout the lives in military units. It inspires designs for the human-nature relationship, such as technological spaces to recognize and explore the nature around the unit [16, 24].

The second drawing shows a person who salutes after opening a door and is labeled as 'surprise.' This describes the surprising moment that arises from the strictly hierarchical structure of the military. It suggests the influences of institutional value systems to daily emotions and inspires designs to address such influences, such as empowering agentic construction of emotional distress narratives [27–29].

The third drawing shows a person jumping like a Super Mario, associated with the label 'fun.' This indicates the joyful feeling of social interactions with peer soldiers. Technological spaces for emotional peer support, such as online peer support communities [40] and digital artifacts for self-narrative expression [33], can utilize this design opportunity.

The fourth drawing, labeled as 'happy,' shows a person who uses a phone call and says "I love you." This drawing inspires designs for social support from outside the military, which is identified as important support resources through Delphi surveys in the Korean military [46]. Designs for support from outside society in the military setting can add examples to the CSCW works about emotional support from families and friends [18, 39, 44].

These diary entries highlight the potential of *4 Emos* probe to explore diverse emotional experiences expressed in the conscripted soldiers' own languages, slightly divergent from institutional languages. We hope *4 Emos* will be the first step in understanding emotional experiences of conscripted soldiers and design alternative care ecologies.

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A History of Care Infrastructure in South Korean Military

This is a brief and partial history focusing on the Military Department, the Assembly, and similar nation-wide agencies managing the military. In other words, another fold of history: the history of community-based sources of care is not covered. The uncovered history includes the creation of the anonymous communities including the Facebook page 'On behalf of you: Army Training Center' (2016) and commercial apps like TYFYS, Goondori, and The Camp. This part of history is excluded in this article because of the relatively less available academic sources and our purpose of describing the institutional efforts for caring soldiers. However, we believe it is worth studied in future to empower the soldiers marginalized from nation-wide knowledge regimes [30] of care.

Nation-wide efforts for care in military has been a target of both academic (e.g., invisible nature of deaths in military [56] and gender-based critique of military culture [47]) and journalist (e.g., repeated preventive measures without culture change [45, 54] and ignorance of soldiers with marginalized identities [52]) critique. Following the call for historicism in CSCW [34], we briefly introduce nation-wide history of the care infrastructure in South Korean army. We used the exact terms (translated in English) used by national-wide agencies, which are emphasized as *italic*. Given the diversity of idioms of distress [22] and the power of institutional idioms to marginalize certain individuals in distress [27, 28], we hope these terms be critically interpreted and potentially be inspiring source of design. To enable future enhancement in translation, we described the original Korean words in the Appendix B.

The *Green Camps*, established in 2011, are places dedicated for the soldiers who are classified as *misfits*, the soldiers who 'struggle to socialize and accept the role as a soldier [51]'. The camp operates psychological training programs such as psychological tests, art therapy, anger management, and individual/group counseling [58]. In 2018, there were total 17 *Green Camps* [51]. The *misfits* consist of the *soldiers who need assistance* and the *soldiers who need consideration* [51]. This type of categorization of *misfits* were first established with a 3-level structure by the Republic of Korea Army (ROKA) after the Guard Post (GP) shooting spree in 2005, and redesigned to the current form after the General Outpost (GOP) shooting spree in 2014 [59]. The *soldiers who need assistance* are soldiers at severe risk of suicide or who have severe mental disorders, who are considered as in need for the intervention of mental health experts, such as psychiatric treatments. The *soldiers who need consideration* include soldiers at less severe risk and first-comers [59]. Ultimately, the purpose of *Green Camps* is to manage the *misfits* in the military. Soldiers in *Green Camps* will end up either return to their units and be evaluated their adjustments or move to the *military examination centers*, where they can possibly be discharged [48, 51].

The *military life professional counselors* are another infrastructure established against the deaths in 2005 [55]. They are mental health experts working inside the military units, and gaining popularity from soldiers because they are non-military civilians who are out of the strict hierarchy [55]. Their work area spans almost every important places of care infrastructure for soldiers [21]. They support the *misfits* in the military units and in the *Green Camps*. They operate the counseling room in the units and offer mental health services to the soldiers, such as individual/group counseling and psychological tests. Further, they play a role of mentor of both the superiors and the subordinates about soldiers' human rights. They also help interpret NEWMPI, or the set of computer-based personality tests provided to all the soldiers to find and manage the *misfits* [49, 50]. Currently, 600-700 counselors are working in the South Korean army [57].

The *National Defense Help Call* is an official helpline for crisis help, sexual violence report, and crime report, and others. Since the renewal of 2014, the help call has been operated 24/7, without breaks [58]. In 2017, the help call was the most well-known military care infrastructure among soldiers [58].

B Original Korean Terms and Translations Used in This Paper

- Green Camps: 그린캠프
- soldiers who need assistance: 도움병사
- soldiers who need consideration: 배려병사
- military life professional counselors: 병영생활전문상담관
- military examination centers: 병역심사관리대
- National Defense Help Call: 국방헬프콜
- NEWMPI: 신인성검사