

## Power, control, and gender: Training as catalyst for dysfunctional behavior at the United States Air Force Academy

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*I explore the role of training practices at the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) in perpetuating power and control issues and the potential consequences of those practices. I argue that trainee responses to control deprivation may have resulted in alleged sexual assaults by male cadets and the eating disorders manifested by female cadets. The paper concludes with implications for HRD, including a call for recognizing the strategic role of training in forming organizational culture.*

Keywords: Training, structuration, military, gender, power

Early in 2003, headlines about sexual assaults at the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) began to appear in national media outlets. Allegations of assaults, cover-ups, investigations, and USAF corrective actions filled the news throughout 2003 and even extended through the summer of 2004. Many seemed surprised that such a scandal would ignite at the elite proving ground for the United States Air Force (USAF), the United States Air Force Academy. As a female USAFA graduate, I was surprised that it had taken so long to become public. While the scandal has generally been interpreted as an organizational culture that perpetuates violence against women, the reality is that the likely underlying catalyst for the scandal affects both women *and* men. I suggest that the sexual assault problems experienced at USAFA find their roots in cadet training practices that deprive individuals of personal control. Thus, in this paper, I explore the implications of these training practices in reproducing the structures that lead to dysfunctional behaviors by both male and female cadets.

Current actions to address the presenting problem of sexual assault have included replacement of senior leadership and a flurry of awareness training programs. While visible and appealing, such responses are reactionary and fail to address the underlying catalyst that fosters the dysfunctional behavior. In this paper, I will argue that the underlying catalyst is the practice of rendering new cadets powerless in a process of stripping individuals' old identities in order to remold them in the image of an elite USAF officer. This deprivation of power, or control, causes some cadets to seek avenues in which they *can* exert control. While there are many potential outlets, both positive and negative, to exert control, there are two visible and devastating negative outlets that may arise directly from the deprivation of power that occurs in early cadet socialization training. Male cadets may attempt to exert control over female cadets and female cadets may attempt to exert control over their own bodies.

In the sections that follow, I provide an overview of my qualifications to offer an interpretive perspective of the context and some background on the USAFA context. I offer an interpretation of dysfunctional behaviors as gendered responses to power deprivation in cadet training and offer Giddens' structuration theory as an explanatory theory. I conclude with implications for research and practice.

### Background

My current interest was triggered by the sexual assault scandal and aftermath at USAFA in recent years. Because of my personal experience as a USAFA cadet, I instinctively felt that the corrective actions reported in the media—such as replacing leaders, offering awareness training, and segregating men and women (Fowler, 2003)—would not resolve the complaints regarding sexual assaults. I believed the problem went much more deeply, but I had not thoughtfully reflected upon what the underlying cause of the assaults might be. I began to more systematically reflect upon my experiences and to more closely monitor media reports regarding the Academy in order to gain a better understanding of the current context. To support my subsequent interpretations, I gathered additional theoretical and empirical evidence from the literature.

Thus, this paper began as a *post hoc* autoethnographic exploration of my own experiences in the context of USAFA. Autoethnography is an approach to qualitative research in which “authors draw on their own experiences

to extend an understanding of a particular discipline or culture” (Holt, 2003, p. 2). It is important to note that this exploration is not an autoethnographic account because ‘self’ is not the sole source of data (Holt, 2003). While an autobiographic impulse initiated the ethnographic moment (Spry, 2001), my inclusion of additional supporting evidence extended the method beyond classic reflexive autoethnography.

I have a unique perspective from which to address the situation at USAFA. As a female graduate of USAFA, I have personal experiences with the culture and practices of the context. As a professor of Human Resource Development, I have also been trained as a social scientist. Because this manuscript is a result of my exploration of self in USAFA, I first must offer some context for my role as observer and participant observer. To that end, it is important for you, the reader to be able to visualize who I am.

As I write this article, I stand just under 5’2”, weigh approximately 118 pounds, and wear a U.S. size 4 petite that is slightly big for me. I weighed exactly the same when I was a senior cadet at USAFA and, because I was considered too close to my maximum weight allowance at that time, my squadron monitored my weight on a regular basis. To this day, I remember the comment made by one of my male squadron-mates as I waited to be weighed in one day, “You know, Jamie, you’d be really cute if you would just lose five or ten pounds.” Today, almost twenty years later, I finally realize that I am not, and was not, fat; however, the psychological scars are still there.

I can also speak to issues of sexual harassment. While I was fortunate to have never been assaulted, I knew quite a few female cadets who said that they had been assaulted. Some reported it, some did not; some left, some stayed. On the other hand, I realize now that sexual harassment was such a fundamental part of the training routine that, at the time, I didn’t even realize it was occurring. Following examples cited by Dunivin (1988), I was just trying to be one of the guys and fell into a hegemonic routine. Part of stripping an individual of identity in order to mold a new identity includes stripping the identity of sexuality. In the process of stripping one’s sexual identity, practices are used that can easily be associated with sexual harassment. Oddly, until I had separated from the USAF and completed my doctoral work, I never considered these common behaviors as sexual harassment.

### **The United States Air Force Academy**

“Integrity first, Service before self, Excellence in all we do”

Core values of USAFA ([www.usafa.af.mil](http://www.usafa.af.mil))

Military service academies in the U.S. (Army, Air Force, Navy, Coast Guard) are undergraduate institutions that typically have approximately 4,000 cadets. The caliber of applicants and the rigor of academics at these institutions have earned them the reputation of being public Ivy-league universities. Cadets are required to take a *minimum* of 18 credit hours per semester, to hold non-paying squadron jobs, and to participate in mandatory extracurricular or intercollegiate activities. Unlike most college students, they have only approximately six weeks of vacation time per year (two weeks at Christmas, one week for Spring Break, and three weeks of summer vacation). The core mission of the institution is to educate, train, and inspire young men and women to become leaders of the USAF, dedicated to becoming career officers who give a lifetime of selfless service to the nation ([www.usafa.af.mil](http://www.usafa.af.mil)).

To initiate this process, cadets are socialized into USAFA through Basic Cadet Training (BCT). When freshmen (otherwise known as ‘doolies’, derived from the Latin *dulia* which means ‘slave’) arrive at USAFA to begin BCT (or ‘Beast’), they enter a system in which personal characteristics are minimized. Their civilian clothing is replaced with a uniform; for men, their hair is shaved and, until very recently, women had their hair cut short. Civilian glasses and contact lenses are replaced with black, horn-rimmed, ‘Birth Control Glasses’ (BCGs). Doolies in BCT may not go anywhere outside the squadron area alone, march at attention at all times, and participate in a series of activities designed to enculturate them into a ‘warrior’ spirit and to teach them how to behave within the USAFA experience. In June 2003, the USAFA commandant indicated that ‘We’re trying to get everyone to talk and think like warriors’ (Weida, 2003).

Interestingly, the Fowler panel (Fowler, 2003) noted that the real purpose of BCT was to create cohesiveness among team members of different socio-economic statuses, classes, races, and genders but that many cadets felt that the system was meant to break the will of new cadets in order to re-mold them into a military image. This denotes a difference between espoused theory and theory in use (Argyris & Schon, 1974) regarding the purpose of BCT; it is quite likely that the tacit theory is what influences the development of the organizational culture.

### **Discussion**

Culture is transmitted in multiple ways, one of which is training associated with socialization (Kamoche, 2000). The existing culture of an organization influences the nature and contents, both implicit and explicit, of socialization

training. In turn, new members are introduced to the culture through socialization training and help maintain that culture. In the case of USAFA, BCT plays a vital role in the transmission of cultural expectations, many of which are tacit. This section describes structuration theory as a means to view the culture-training duality with a lens that encompasses issues broader than sexual assault; the section also describes the gender-based outcomes of the USAFA BCT.

### *Structuration*

Structuration was proposed by Giddens (1979) as a means to integrate theories of structuralism, functionalism, and symbolic interactionism. The essence of structuration is that individuals' actions recreate the social structures that, in turn, constrain individuals' actions (Wallace & Wolf, 1995). However, structuration also leaves room for the possibility that individual actions can change those social structures that serve to constrain action. Thus, structuration provides a useful lens for the context of USAFA because it enables us to see how social practices tend to be reproduced, often unconsciously, through our responses and reactions to social events. While there are many interconnected components of structuration theory (see Turner, 1991 for a detailed description of the theory), this study takes three primary elements of the theory for application to USAFA training practices.

A key component of structuration is how actions tend to occur over time and in different places (Turner, 1991; Wallace & Wolf, 1995). The continuation of practices over time and space creates routines that help individuals navigate their daily lives. Giddens highlights the importance of routines by describing the works of Bettelheim and Sargant (Giddens, 1979). Concentration camps, battle under fire, and religious conversions are given as examples of situations in which routine is shattered and replaced with new routines. Those who are able to find some means of control in their lives are the ones who survived this 'resocialization' process. This concept of the consequences of routinization and resocialization is particularly enlightening for USAFA. As described earlier, the initial training experience for new cadets involves shattering old routines in order to break down old identities and instill new, USAF identities. I argue that the resulting search for control suggested by structuration theory acts as a catalyst for dysfunctional behaviors among USAFA cadets.

Another component of structuration theory that is particularly useful in explicating cultural reinforcement at USAFA is the notion of reflexive monitoring. Individuals pay attention to the actions of others and the consequences of those actions (Turner, 1991). Individuals make decisions about their own actions based on the consequences of others' actions. In this way, implicit understandings of accepted cultural practices are generated—what is rewarded and what is punished.

Finally, rules associated with power and the source of application of power are fundamental components of structuration theory that are frequently overlooked. Giddens highlights the source of power as either internal or external. By removing vestiges of power from new cadets, the source of power is externalized. An external locus of control is indicated in cases of eating disorders (Kerzhnerman, 2003); in other words, individuals feel that others have greater power over their actions or decisions and, as a result, they seek alternative outlets to experience a sense of control. Structuration enables us to explore the role of power and locus of control as it relates to dysfunctional behaviors of organizational members.

In the case of USAFA, structuration allows us to go beyond the superficial, but highly visible, corrective actions of replacing leadership and providing awareness training. Structuration enables us to more coherently explore what structural factors might cause USAFA members to behave in certain ways such that a cultural system is created and maintained. Further, the theory suggests that subsequent actions by members of the system may actually change the structures that undergird the system. This allows us to make suggestions for changing the underlying structures that may be serving as catalysts for the 'cultural' problems being experienced at USAFA. While the problem is indeed associated with the organizational culture, as suggested by the Hall memorandum and the Fowler panel (Fowler, 2003), the patterns of action have been directed at addressing only the explicit problem at hand instead of exploring the tacit reasons for the existence of the problem. By exploring the broader system looking for 'dysfunctional' actions, we can find at least one other problem that likely has a common underlying catalyst—eating disorders.

### *Gendered Responses to Training Practices*

Prior to arriving at USAFA, cadets have already been socialized by broad cultural influences associated with gender roles. Once arriving at USAFA, cadets enter a basic training program designed, in part, to fundamentally alter their individual sense of identity. This practice is meant to initiate the cadet into desired cultural norms which reinforce what can be called a 'combat, masculine warrior' image (Dunivin, 1994). Thus, influence transitions from the socius to the psyche and then back to the socius (Billson, 1994) (see Figure 1). This section discusses how this chain of influence impacts both male and female cadets.

**Figure 1. Chain of Socius-psyche Influence**

	Pre-BCT (Socius)	BCT (Psyche)	Post-BCT (Socius)
Male Cadets	Combat Masculine Warrior (CMW)	Loss of Control = Sexual Assault	CMW Reinforced
Female Cadets	Attractive Feminine Model (AFM)	Loss of Control = Eating Disorder	CMW & AFM in conflict

In Western society, women are socialized to feel successful if they are attractive and feminine like runway models; in other words, women are judged by their appearance and thinness (Dalgleish et al., 2001). This cultural norm for women to be attractive, feminine models influences girls before they even come to USAFA. This is a difficult norm to uphold while in BCT and during the USAFA experience in general. A common phrase directed at female cadets while I was in training was that they suffered from ‘CHD’—Colorado Hip Disease—even when they were well within weight limits. Unlike their civilian counterparts, female cadets wear uniforms that are not particularly stylish, contend with stringent weight standards with limited access to healthy low calorie foods, and face regular hostility from male cadets who don’t believe women should be allowed to attend USAFA (Fowler, 2003).

Due to the nature of BCT, young women may feel that they have lost control over their personal lives. Research suggests that eating disorders, such as bulimia nervosa, are responses to powerlessness that frequently occur in women who have an external locus of control (e.g., Dalgleish et al., 2001; Slade, 1982; Waller, 1998). Another key factor in the occurrence of eating disorders is dissatisfaction with appearance, such that those who believe they are not thin enough are likely to manifest abnormal eating behaviors (Tylka, 2004).

One of the (at least implicit) goals of BCT is to create combat warriors; the USAFA Public Affairs newsletter, entitled *Warrior Focus*, highlights the combat, masculine warrior culture (Dunivin, 1994) of USAFA. To adopt this image of a combat, masculine warrior, and therefore fit within the USAFA culture, women must unlearn almost two decades of socialization and adopt a persona that is counter to what they have been taught equates to success. In addition, they must combat forces that continue to encourage them to meet the attractive, feminine model cultural norms. Thus, women battle both a sense of loss of control during BCT and, especially after BCT, a heightened pressure to meet both masculine *and* feminine cultural norms.

Military women in general have a significantly higher rate of eating disorders, in particular bulimia, than their civilian counterparts (McNulty, 2001; Peterson, Talcott, Keileher, & Smith, 1995). Freshmen female cadets at USAFA experience bulimia three times more often than female freshmen at other colleges (Anonymous, 1988). Further, evidence suggests that these conditions are not pre-existing, but that contextual military factors are the cause of the eating disorder (McNulty, 2001). These contextual factors may include the deprivation of control in BCT, stringent weight standards (Fraser, 2000), and negative perceptions of the dominant group (Anonymous, 1988; Fowler, 2003).

Unlike women, who are socialized to be attractive, feminine models, men are socialized to be more like combat, masculine warriors; this is especially true for men in the military. In general, men are seen as successful based on their achievements instead of their personal appearance (Welch & Page, 1979). Further, Western (particularly American) culture tends to objectify women and “frequently views sexual intercourse as an act of masculine conquest” (Adams-Curtis & Forbes, 2004, p. 92). A fear that one does not meet these standards of masculinity may result in acts of sexual aggression toward women (Rada, 1978). Studies of fraternities have also suggested that group dynamics of fraternity culture encourage sexual coercion (Martin & Hummer, 1989); while there are no fraternities *per se* at USAFA, it is a common belief among USAFA cadets that they are part of one big fraternity and, at the very least, individual squadrons easily take on characteristics of fraternities. Thus, male cadets are socialized to believe that ‘achieving’ sexual intercourse is a sign that they meet the standards of the combat, masculine warrior culture upheld by USAFA. Experiences that begin in BCT reinforce the cultural perception that men are ‘supposed’ to be dominant, achievement-oriented, powerful, and masculine. As with female cadets, male cadets also experience a climate created in part by the USAFA training system in which cultural perceptions may lead to dysfunctional behaviors—for women, the dysfunction is bulimia and for men, the dysfunction is sexual aggression.

But, also like the women, male cadets experience another factor that may cause their dysfunctional behavior. Since the 1940s, repeated research has indicated that rape is often the result of a need for control, in particular over women (Adams-Curtis & Forbes, 2004). If BCT removes a sense of personal control from cadets, this research suggests that

they will seek an outlet in which to express control as a response. If negative sanctions do not result from sexual aggression, theory (Giddens, 1979) and research (Schewe & O'Donohue, 1996) indicate that such behavior is likely to continue.

Thus, initial socialization training may influence dysfunctional behaviors in two ways—through the psyche and the socius. First, through the psyche, by removing a sense of personal control, cadets seek avenues to reestablish control; men may demonstrate dominance over women and women may demonstrate dominance over their own bodies. Second, through the socius, by reinforcing cultural expectations regarding a combat, masculine warrior, cadet training increases a climate that accepts (sexual) aggression on the part of men and creates cultural conflict for women who attempt to meet standards for both men and women.

## Implications

While adjustments to the larger organizational and societal culture would certainly stem the problem with dysfunctional behaviors by both male and female cadets, a key overlooked starting point to facilitate such a culture shift is the initial socialization training (BCT) experienced by new cadets. There is a need to reassess the purpose of the current USAF and USAFA and adapt training strategies accordingly. Although quite a number of positive modifications have been made over the years, these changes do not seem to be made in a strategic way and the underlying premise of the training continues to be based in military training culture hundreds of years old. Training designers at USAFA need to strategically reassess BCT (and perhaps the entire four-year training sequence) and ask questions such as: What kinds of missions is the USAF most likely to face? And, How can we best prepare USAF officers (both male and female) to accomplish those missions? I submit that the combat, masculine warrior mission is a small percentage of the entire operations of the USAF. Even in wartime, the USAF tends to be much more removed from the need for such a cultural image.

Perhaps it is this very removal from a traditional military frontline combat role that instigates a stronger push toward creating a 'warrior spirit' among USAFA cadets and officials. While other service academies have modified many more of their practices to be more inclusive and less overtly 'combat, masculine warrior' in their cultures, USAFA has lagged behind (Fowler, 2003). And, yet, the USAF seems to have more problems with issues that stem from the attempt to create such a combat image. Could it be that the USAF is trying harder to foster such an image to account for the perception that it is the most 'antiseptic' branch of combat arms?

Regardless of the cultural push for a warrior culture, USAFA has an opportunity to stem some of the dysfunctional behaviors that manifest due to control issues. Instead of holding sexual harassment and sexual assault training, training designed to increase cadets' sense of personal control is more likely to influence the broader dysfunctions and improve cadet performance. In fact, the types of training provided to cadets currently may actually be more damaging to women.

First, becoming more aware of the problem without being able to make effective change may be very frustrating. Women do bear the brunt of both the sexual assault dysfunctional behavior on the part of male cadets and their own problems with eating disorders. There is little that the women can do to change the culture. They are typically given strategies to avoid getting assaulted; this merely removes them from being part of and accepted by the larger to which they want to belong. Second, Wright (1991) notes that the female cadets in the class of 1993 were taught how to wear make-up and to avoid drinking alcohol when socializing with male cadets because 'boys will be boys'. Current recommendations from the Fowler panel also include admonitions for women to avoid potentially threatening situations by limiting exposure to alcohol consumption (by self or others). This suggests that guidance provided to female cadets in 1993 is consistent with guidance given to current cadets. While, on the surface, such training seems benign to beneficial, it may foster cultural stigma for female cadets. Dunivin (1988) notes that women 'fit in' in the USAF by becoming one of the guys. By not socializing with male cadets, female cadets risk further alienation from the culture. Alienation may actually increase the risk of assault!

HRD professionals can play a key role in the remediation of the USAFA situation. Trained in organization development and training & development, HRD professionals are able to help an organization conduct strategic assessments for broad scale, organization development and to subsequently create strategically aligned training & development to facilitate organizational goals. Further, USAFA may prove to be a learning case for the HRD profession for addressing issues of social justice within and across organizations. HRD professionals can influence the practice of social justice both within USAFA and, as a result of their actions, they can influence other organizations with similar cultural dysfunctions.

## Conclusion

The Fowler panel noted that BCT was an important indoctrination point that influenced the climate for potential sexual assaults (Fowler, 2003). Some of the fundamental cultural changes recommended by the panel would address issues of both male and female dysfunctional behaviors. These recommended changes, however, are embedded within the text of the report and are not highlighted in the recommendations section; these changes would be complex, expensive, and time consuming and have not been the observable focus of action by USAF leadership.

Changes to training are likely to meet with stiff resistance. Already alumni are complaining that changes to date at USAFA and the freshman year training have eroded the heritage and tradition of the institution (Sprengelmeyer, 2004). While my autoethnographic exploration has theorized about a potential overlooked cause for both sexual aggression and eating disorders, it has not been tested. It should be. Future study should explore the relationship between locus of control and, at the very least, risk factors for sexual aggression and eating disorders. More in-depth analysis could be accomplished by identifying those who have experienced such dysfunctional behaviors and then identifying those individuals' locus of control. If control does appear to be a factor influencing dysfunctional behavior, training could be initiated to address issues of power and control and outcomes could later be assessed.

The issues of sexual assault and eating disorders at USAFA are indeed connected to culture and climate. However, when concepts of structuration are applied, it becomes evident that training may be a common source of these dysfunctional behaviors. By changing the nature of power deprivation in BCT and by providing training to mitigate negative effects of loss of control, I contend that USAFA will achieve much greater success in reducing both sexual assaults and eating disorders.

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