



Women in a "Combat, Masculine-Warrior" Culture: The Performance of Emotion Work

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Abstract

Emotion work is a phenomenon in which individuals attempt to control emotions to meet social guidelines. Guidelines associated with military culture are often biased against women. This qualitative study looked at emotion work performed in response to gender bias within a nonprofit organization strongly influenced by the U.S. Air Force culture. Although both men and women desired a more diverse culture, the emotion work they performed to meet existing social guidelines stifled potential cultural change.

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DUTY...HONOR...COUNTRY. Those three hallowed words reverently dictate what you want to be, what you can be, what you will be. They are your rallying point to build courage when courage seems to fail, to regain faith when there seems to be little cause for faith, to create hope when hope becomes forlorn.

General Douglas MacArthur

Farewell speech, United States Military Academy

May 12, 1962

The military culture has had a profound impact on American life. While most Americans would be unable to recite the entire quote above, most of them probably have heard or even recited the first three words and immediately recognize a connection to the military. In the last decade, the daily news has been filled with stories related to gender issues in the military—the Kelly Flynn discharge, Tailhook, Aberdeen Proving Grounds, and the list goes on. These incidents may cause one to wonder why the military has continued to struggle to change its cultural biases against women. This article will argue that the management of one's experience and/or expression of emotion, known as emotion work, may inhibit military or quasi-military organizations from effecting cultural change.

This study looked at the performance of emotion work associated with a nonprofit organization heavily influenced by the United States Air Force culture. The present study is a more in-depth exploration of an outcome of a larger study that looked at the purposes for which members of this nonprofit conducted emotion work. Diversity, in particular gender diversity, was an important factor in the performance of emotion work. Further, despite a desire to change the culture, the performance of emotion work masked that desire from others, effectively stifling efforts to effect cultural change.



Emotion Work

Emotion work is a primary component of Hochschild's emotion systems theory. Hochschild referred to her work as "emotion systems theory" because it is comprised of "a system composed of individual acts of 'emotion work', social 'feeling rules', and a great variety of exchanges between people in private and public life". Emotion work is the active attempt to change, in either quality or degree, an emotion held by an individual. The second major component of Hochschild's work is that of "feeling rules". Feeling rules are the "socially shared, albeit often latent (not thought about unless probed at)" guidelines that govern how we want to try to feel. They guide our expression of emotion and they guide our attempt to internalize the acceptable emotion (as defined by the situational rule). Feeling rules are embedded within the culture framing the interaction.

Emotion work has been studied in a wide variety of organizations, including airlines, police departments, bill collection agencies, and health care agencies. Although women have often been the focus of these studies, the reason for that was because women are often employed in *positions* that require more emotion work. Wharton and Erickson have specifically looked at women's roles in a variety of contexts as they were related to emotion work. Certainly emotion work studies have looked at gender within a marital or intimate relationship context. However, no studies have looked at the interconnection between emotion work and gender *issues* specifically in an organizational context. This study looks at emotion work performed by both women and men as it relates to gender biases in an organizational culture.

Culture

The term "culture" first made its way into the English language in the 15th century through French from Latin roots. Although culture has a long history among anthropologists and sociologists, the term "organizational culture" is relatively new among management and organizational scholars. It was first used as a synonym for organizational climate in the 1960's. Denison argued convincingly that the difference between organizational culture and organizational climate is actually one of interpretation. Both terms represent the same phenomenon that can be seen as creating and influencing the social context of an organization. Thus, it may be said that organizational culture, in some form, has been studied among organizational scholars for quite some time.

Probably one of the most influential scholars in the field of organizational culture is Schein. His conceptual model of organizational culture forms the foundation of much of the research in this area. Schein argued that organizational culture has three distinct levels that interact with one another: basic assumptions, values, and artifacts and creations. Basic assumptions are the unseen preconscious beliefs commonly held and taken for granted by organizational members. Values are the conscious or espoused beliefs commonly held by organizational members. Artifacts and creations are the visible manifestations of the belief system, such as uniforms or logos.

Because organizations are subsystems of larger social systems, it is important to describe the culture of organizations as they relate to the institutionalized values of the superordinate



system. Although the organization presented here is not a formal affiliate of the United States Air Force, its relationship with the Air Force and aerospace industry and its overwhelming number of current or former Air Force personnel as members suggest that the Air Force may be considered the superordinate system for this organization. The Air Force culture, of course, is embedded within the larger culture of the military. Many would argue that the famous words that began this article—duty, honor, country—best exemplify the culture of the military. However, these three words are perhaps more indicative of the *conscious* values held within the military.

The *unconscious* basic assumptions which truly define the nature of the culture can best be characterized as having a "combat, masculine-warrior" orientation. While the military incorporates a wide variety of activities, one activity associated with the military defines its very existence—combat. In the prologue to the second edition of his classic treatise on the professional soldier, Janowitz commented that, "the notion of combat—preparation for battle and actual battle—has remained a central military value" throughout history. The masculine-warrior image is the second element of the military culture. Dunivin describes the origin of this image:

As an institution comprised primarily of men, its culture is shaped by men. Soldiering is viewed as a masculine role—the profession of war, defense, and combat is defined by society as men's work. Thus, a deeply entrenched "cult of masculinity" (with accompanying masculine norms, values, and lifestyles) pervades military culture. (p. 533-544).

Associated with this underlying combat, masculine-warrior culture is the traditional model of the military. This model "espouses conservative moralistic ideology as reflected in its ethics and customs". The traditional model reinforces socialization that complements the masculine norms and values of the underlying military culture. The military typically recruits and rewards those individuals who embody the combat, masculine-warrior ideology. This has resulted in an officer corps that is dominated by white men who perceive themselves as masculine warriors. However, the changing perspectives in American culture have begun to influence the models associated with the military culture.

An alternative model of the military is beginning to challenge the traditional model of military culture. This evolving model, largely in response to social pressure, is marked by more inclusionary beliefs, policies, and practices. This model is also based on the changing attitude among many military members that the best-qualified person should be selected for assignments, regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation. Despite the growing influence of the evolving model, the military is still marked by the underlying culture of the combat, masculine-warrior. Thus, conflict and change is inevitable; yet the outcome is not certain. As Dunivin points out, this uncertainty leads to an enduring culture that embodies both change, through the evolving model, and continuity, through the traditional model.

The Air Force culture

Although the Air Force is the newest of the military services, there is some support that it may embody the traditional model more than the evolving model. In comparison to the other service branches, the Air Force has a higher percentage of non-combat occupations which offer the potential for a higher percentage of female participation. As the evolving model opens more



occupational specialties to women, that percentage will probably increase. Nevertheless, a study conducted by Stoddard found that:

...the relatively low rates of female participation in the Air Force as compared to its minimal combat roles, cannot be attributed to organizational constraints. This might well be an informal consequence of gender preferences by its leadership. (p. 30).

This gender preference among senior Air Force leaders had been made public by then-Air Force Chief of Staff, General Merrill McPeak when he testified before Congress in 1991:

...if ordered to choose between an inferior male pilot and a much better female pilot, he would choose the male. 'I admit it doesn't make much sense, but that's the way I feel about it,' he said. In other words, for General McPeak the issue is not job performance or ability, or even military effectiveness. The existence of female combat pilots would simply offend his sense of proper gender roles. .

More examples of the gender preferences institutionalized in the Air Force can be seen in symbols found at the elite proving ground of the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA). Academy graduates, in particular, are often considered to be the "professional" soldiers who are responsible for being the bearers of the military culture. The inscription that greets every individual who approaches USAFA reads, "BRING ME MEN." This is a very clear symbolic message to cadets being indoctrinated into the Air Force culture. Even the airplanes on display at the Academy as memorials are combat aircraft from which women pilots are excluded from flying.

Despite the dominance of the traditional model of military culture, the evolving model of military culture certainly influences the Air Force. As with other branches of the military, external forces for social change have brought more diversity into the Air Force. Women and minorities have been integrated into most specialties within the Air Force, perhaps reluctantly. The strong culture of the Air Force has been influenced by laws and policies that have required the acceptance, or at least broader official tolerance, of minorities, women, and gays. These civilian directives are generally accepted by and eventually assimilated into the Air Force because the service adheres to the Clausewitzian model that the military is at the disposal of the civilian, political leadership of a nation because war is simply an extension of politics, but by other means. Thus, when given a directive, even one that conflicts with the very nature of the Air Force culture, the Air Force follows the directive. Only then can the evolving model of organizational culture begin to take a foothold.

Method

This study focused on the aspects of emotion work associated with the "combat, masculine-warrior" culture of a non-profit organization. The larger study, from which this study was drawn, looked at emotion work actions associated with a wide variety of organizational functions. This was a qualitative study based on a naturalistic design. A nonprofit organization established in 1946 and associated with aerospace and national defense was the research site for this study. The primary mission of the organization was to educate legislators and the public at



large about the importance of air power (often perceived by members as analogous to the Air Force) in both national defense and the betterment of mankind. The membership of over 160,000 people in this organization was primarily composed of Air Force active duty members, Air Force Reserve component members, veterans and retirees; however, membership was also drawn from civil service personnel, cadets, and civilian individuals who had never experienced military service, many of whom were affiliated with aerospace industry. The sample for this study was drawn from the professional staff, the Board of Directors, and the senior leadership of the states.

Several methods of data collection were used—including individual interviews, observations, and document analyses—to provide a measure of validity through data-collection method triangulation. Documents reviewed included letters and e-mails from organizational members, videotapes, field books, and organizational publications. A total of 25 individuals (9 women, 16 men) were interviewed. Participant observations were conducted among the volunteers at a state meeting, a Board of Directors meeting, a convention exhibit, and several luncheons, dinners, and cocktail parties. Traditional observations were conducted of the staff members at the National Headquarters.

Over 800 pages of transcribed interviews and correspondence were analyzed using NUD*IST software. Three "disinterested" colleagues performed coding and data interpretation verification, resulting in an agreement rate of 89% between the researcher and at least one colleague on the primary codes in the analyzed excerpt. Using an anthropological approach, the researcher made the final decision in a qualitative sense regarding which codes to apply to the transcripts after considering comments from outside coders. In addition, seven scholars with a basic understanding of the theoretical framework, yet unfamiliar with the research site, reviewed the findings and interpretations for consistency. As a final measure to ensure trustworthiness of the data, two staff and two volunteer members of the organization also reviewed the final document for accuracy of interpretation.

Results

The findings capture both the biases against women perceived by members of this organization and the emotion work actions taken as a result of those biases. Certainly women reported the majority of the perceived biases and performed the majority of the emotion work; however, several men were also aware of the biases, were displeased with the existence of the biases, and performed emotion work in response to the biases. These respondents felt that the predominant military culture narrowed the vision and capabilities of the organization because a significant segment of society was largely excluded from assuming meaningful roles in the organization.

Gender bias

Both men and women mentioned that the organization had problems with diversity issues. In short, the organization was not representative of the population with which it was associated and from which it was largely drawn. Women comprise approximately 8% of the senior leadership in this organization; however, in the United States Air Force, women comprise approximately 14.3% of the senior leadership (defined as an officer in or above the grade of



colonel). It is interesting to note, however, that neither organization has women in the most senior positions (i.e., national officer for the nonprofit organization or lieutenant general/general officer for the United States Air Force).

Although the staff was more diverse than the volunteer population, gender bias could be seen across volunteer and staff lines. For example, among the ten senior positions on this 100-member staff, only the Chief of Administration position was held by a woman. As one participant commented, a lower level of "directors" who reported to the Assistant Executive Director were known as "The Girl Directors" because two of the four were women.

The organization was "known on the street as a Good Ol' Boy network" primarily comprised of "white, male, veterans, preferably pilots." One volunteer may have been subtly demonstrating the pervasiveness of the male dominated culture in a joke he provided. The joke is a listing of "seminars for males" that would be offered "to men of all marital status". The courses on the list included "You too can do housework" and "You - the weaker sex" and many other stereotypical topics addressing male and female roles in society.

There was a clear institutionalization of bias against women from the early days of the organization that continued among the volunteers in particular. Such a bias can be seen in a book published in the 1980s by a senior leader of the organization that traced the organization's history. The book reminisced about the first National Convention held by the organization in 1947. The author quoted an article from an early edition of the organization's magazine, "The girls of Columbus were aerodynamically sound, friendly, and plentiful; but the hotel room get-togethers were basically masculine." Such a comment may not have been that unusual for the time. However, there were still quite a few members who remained active in the organization who were members in 1947. It was not uncommon to speak to members who maintained the attitude that, although it was nice to have women around, organizational matters should be restricted to men.

During one observation, four men discussed what a travesty it was that women had been allowed to enroll in The Citadel and, thus, hinder the ability of the school to prepare young men for military service. They did not even appear to notice that others could view their comments as offensive. In a formal interview, one volunteer remarked that he believed potential recipients for spousal scholarships should be carefully reviewed because the women who received them should be pursuing careers which would explicitly support their military husbands' careers and the community affiliations the wives had should be through churches and PTAs instead of professional career associations. Such comments highlighted the biases that the organization had toward women. These biases were so ingrained, according to one volunteer, "... they are not going to see that, 'they' being the older generation of leaders. They'll say, 'What's wrong with the way we look? We look like who we are.'"

Because of the organization's reputation, however, many who do not fit the description of "white, male, veterans, preferably pilots" may not attempt to involve themselves in the organization. This limited the potential members who would otherwise support the mission of the organization. As two volunteers remarked, such individuals may come to a meeting, look around, and realize that they do not see themselves in any of the others present. Indeed, this bias against



women also limited full involvement by those who already supported the mission. One of the ways these women limited their involvement was by either suppressing their felt emotions or by evoking unfelt emotions in an attempt to fit into the culture. In other words, they performed emotion work.

Emotion work responses

In reaction to the biases seen against women in this culture, many members of the organization conducted emotion work. One female volunteer remarked about the culture:

I certainly feel a sense of being, *certainly*, not on an equal footing with, and never *will* be able to attain an equal footing with, the men who are in this organization. ...I really feel that there certainly is a bit of discrimination toward women in this organization. And as I said, I'm not a feminist and I don't have a problem with it. That's just the way it is. But that certainly is something that is a problem within [the organization]. ...I see that as being an important issue for some other women.

This volunteer's view of her role in the organization was similar to views found in a study of female active duty Air Force officers who "emphatically said they were not feminists". Nevertheless, this volunteer saw a need for social change for the benefit of the organization. She felt disappointed for the organization that it did not pursue such social change as actively as it, perhaps, should have. Despite her feelings, she remarked, "I probably wouldn't express that to anybody but you, actually."

Such suppression of emotion was not uncommon among the volunteers. One female volunteer, a pilot, talked about suppressing her anger at an older male volunteer who voiced his opinion that leadership positions should be reserved for (male) pilots. She commented that she suppressed her desired response of, "Well, you know, I have to take my skirt off to put on my flight suit." She focused on her role as a pilot, as an elected national leader, and as an active volunteer at the local level.

Another woman commented that emotion work was just another way of "playing the game" so that she could continue to serve in a leadership capacity. She hoped that by appearing to be "one of the guys" she could eventually move into a more influential position and effect change in the organization. Ironically, it was the gender discrimination directed toward this particular volunteer that catalyzed emotion work on the part of some of the male volunteers.

This female volunteer had extensive experience at all levels in the organization; she had been an active member for decades; and was so well respected by her local chapter that a service award was created in her honor. She was also one of only two women to have held a National level office in the fifty year history of the organization. Both women served as National Secretary. However, when this volunteer expressed an interest in running for President of the organization, she was apparently told by both the formal and informal nominating committees that she could not run for that office. Several men expressed deep resentment, frustration, and even anger about this turn of events during individual interviews. However, when asked if others were aware of their feelings, all of them indicated that they certainly would not share their



perspectives on this situation with anyone other than the researcher. Thus, even men are performing emotion work related to issues of gender bias in this organization.

The culture was so strongly entrenched that at least two volunteers believed formal policies would be required in order to effect change. One volunteer felt that changes made in the active duty Air Force based on mandated policies had led to positive culture change in the Air Force. He hoped for similar success in the association. His perceptions are in concert with the literature on social change in the military.

Discussion

The biases against women in this organization largely stem from its "combat, masculine-warrior" culture associated with the Air Force. The culture was further reinforced by the many members who originally joined the organization in the 1950s when women were not as broadly represented in the workforce in general. This group was the modal age category of membership (over 70 years of age). The emotion work performed in reaction to the gender biased culture was largely due to the strength of the culture and the fact that women were a pronounced minority.

Researchers generally view emotion work as having negative organizational ramifications due to the physical demands placed on individuals performing emotion work. However, this article argues that there are broader sociological influences of emotion work in organizational settings. Although there was a growing body of individuals in the present study who strongly desired a more diverse, less gender-biased culture, the very emotion work they performed to "fit in" impeded the transition to a more evolving culture. Thus, the negative ramifications of emotion work for this organization were not due to personnel turnover or absenteeism as a result of emotion work burnout; rather, they were due to a masking of a desire to change the obsolete culture of the organization. Emotion work stifled the need for such change.

Comments by male volunteers suggested that they believed women should engage in activities and professions intended to "support" their husbands. There was also a belief that women had not risen to the highest ranks of the organization because those who were otherwise eligible tended to be "too masculine" or "too aggressive". Research suggests that behavior associated with assertiveness is viewed more favorably when it is performed by men than it is when performed by women. Further, Gallois (1993) suggests that the higher the power differential between men and women, the more women must be cognizant of the emotional context of the situation and the more they must act accordingly. The power differential between men and women in this organization further suggests a need for the women to manage their stronger negative emotions in order to succeed.

Dunivin and Tetreault argued more than ten years ago that women in the military did not have a critical mass to have a voice for change. While that is *probably* still true for the active duty military, it is *definitely* true of this military-influenced organization. Dunivin noted that women in the Air Force "internalized the male-defined work identity and role" (p. 64). A similar phenomenon may be occurring among the female volunteers. The women volunteers "accentuated work roles that were rewarded" and "downplayed devalued gender roles" in order



to fit in. In other words, part of downplaying a devalued gender role was to avoid what was perceived as inappropriate expression of emotion. Although many men and women in the organization did subscribe to a more "evolving" perspective of culture, they were not able to institutionalize that perspective. The use of emotion work regarding the cultural biases against women may have been largely responsible for that failure.

The emotion work performed in reaction to gender-bias by members of this organization has several implications for this organization, and perhaps others. One clear implication is the potential importance of emotion work to the achievement of organizational goals. Because much of the emotion work is internal and not easily identified by others, it raises the possibility that decision-making authorities in the organization are overlooking it. Some of this emotion work may have negative ramifications for the organization (e.g., a volunteer who would claim to support a change in practice while believing it had no hope for its success, implying the possibility of at least subconscious barriers to the success of the change). While such emotion work actions may not have a direct and immediately visible impact on the organization, there are certainly some indirect, and perhaps long term, outcomes from such actions for the organization. Leaders need access to the thoughts and feelings of those involved in the decision; however, if those individuals perform emotion work to hide what they perceive as inappropriate emotions, leaders' decisions will not be as effective as they could be. However, perhaps the most far-reaching implication of emotion work as it directly relates to gender biases is the suppression of culture change.

Adherence to a culture that is strongly biased against women will clearly disrupt the ability to recruit new members, especially female members. Further, both male and female members who subscribe to the "evolving" model of culture may grow weary of a culture hostile to women and choose to suspend active involvement in the organization. By failing to include a large segment of society that is increasingly represented in the organization's largest constituency base, the Air Force, this organization may distance itself from the very people it was created to serve. Finally, organizational members may find it difficult to educate a more enlightened public about the importance of air power, a key organizational mission, if they are out of step with the larger culture.

MacArthur's stirring words of "duty, honor, country" may indeed serve as a "rallying point" for military members, in particular when they are engaged in combat. However, the implication of a "combat, masculine-warrior" culture connected to these words may not be effective in the daily operations of an organization affiliated with the military culture. If the organization does not attend to the management of emotional experience and expression conducted by its members, emotion work may contribute to the demise of this organization that is firmly rooted in the core values of "duty, honor, country."



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