

# The Multifaceted Nature of White Female Attrition in the Military

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*Research abounds about the military's recruiting and retention woes. Current operations in Iraq and Afghanistan and the imposition of the stop loss policy only magnify the problem. While the military experiences such challenges in all segments of its population, the problem appears to be acute among white females. This article employs agency theory to explain the extent to which white females in the military exercise career options. It is argued that white females are simply exercising full agency and a theory of attrition may help to mitigate this loss, that if left unchecked, could have grim policy implications for recruiting and retaining this important constituency.*

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The U.S. military is experiencing a growing challenge in recruiting and retaining women. Of particular concern is the white female. The attrition for white females, once they join the military, is higher than any other segment of the military's population. And, according to the Department of Defense's (DoD) own population report as well as other sources, women in both the enlisted and commissioned corps are more likely to emanate from a non-white minority group (DoD 2004; Department of Veterans Affairs 2005). This article employs agency theory to help explain the reasons for high attrition among white women in the military by exploring the traditional yet divergent and popular views held about women in the military; the multiple factors that may contribute to unusually high attrition among white women; and given this foundation, the article proposes a theoretical framework to better understand the nature of this attrition. I then offer solutions, that if not implemented, could have grave policy implications on the recruitment and retention of this important constituency.

## **The Question of a Woman's Place**

There are two prevailing views about women in the military. Those on the right submit that women's presence proves disruptive to an otherwise cohesive unit of men. This position implies that women deliberately insert their ill-mannered selves to thwart the efforts of men off to battle. And, in the same vein, if only implied, women's mere presence induces grown rational men to view them as temptresses ready to lead them astray. This torrid notion devalues the "sheroic" lengths to which women have gone to prove themselves. These views are held by those who support the lapse in the original

charter of the Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS) (Center for Military Readiness (CMR) April 2002) and hail the capture and subsequent rescue of Private First Class (PFC) Jessica Lynch during the initial phase of Operation Iraqi Freedom as reminders that women do not belong in the military (CMR, December 2003). They choose to neither remember nor acknowledge the death of PFC Lori Piestawa, a member of the same platoon, preferring the image of women as “damsels in distress.”

Some on the right see any integration of women in the military as the feminization of male territory and culture (Titunik 2000). They ask that the military not be used for social experiments (Lister 2000). And, events like Tailhook, where Naval and Marine aviators groped their female colleagues; the Army’s Aberdeen Proving Ground sexual harassment scandal; the Army’s top enlisted man being accused of similar indiscretions; and other similar incidents, tend to reinforce this position. On the other hand, some on the left insist on the equality of the sexes through expanded roles for military women. Yet, they dismiss the military as a bastion of masculinity where women are second class citizens or worse yet, sex fiends. Titunik (2000) takes issue with those who see the military as this “hypermasculine” culture that encourages behaviors like those of Tailhook and Aberdeen and where words like “compassionate” and “gentleness” do not apply (Titunik 2000, 232).

But one group to which the military has historically turned to bolster its ranks is the white female. This is of particular importance to the field of public management/public administration because like white males, white females represent a significant talent pool from which the military recruits. However, attrition for white females reflects a more troubling pattern than for any other group. And, this problem comes at a time when more formerly non-traditional occupations are being opened to women than ever before. What then are the problems that white females encounter once they enter the military that cause them to prematurely separate?

The literature acknowledges the problems posed by white female attrition but has not directly addressed the reasons. As such, this article attempts to shed some light on these reasons. First, the extant literature hints at multiple factors influencing this exodus and agency theory provides a theoretical basis for further analysis. Second, propositions are developed to support a theory of attrition that generally explains why women, especially white women, prematurely separate from the military. Finally, the conclusion discusses the plausible outcomes of current attrition patterns and examines the policy recommendations of employing various strategies to help break this cycle.

### **Agency Theory: Taking Responsibility**

While the positions of the right and left about women in the military; one for the exclusion of women, the other for their increased presence, are both extreme and therefore dubious; there is yet a third view. If women are to be taken seriously and shed the proverbial image of victimhood, they must assume responsibility for responding constructively to acts of oppression (Mazur 1998). Not taking responsibility is to almost seem irresponsible. By employing agency theory, which asserts that a woman can make her own decisions by establishing the conditions for choice, consent and refusal, women have the right to take responsibility. But to use partial agency theory, to which some on the left ascribe, is to define women as compromised and not entirely responsible, yet

partly to blame for acts of oppression. This view reduces women to that of culpable victims. Because women are so portrayed, they are consistently seen as “novelty” by the media (Mazur 1998, 5). This suggests that women’s behaviors cause men to do the things that they would not have otherwise done. To Mazur, such falsehoods are borne of ignorance about women in the military.

### *Dispelling the Novelty Myth*

Mazur (1998) attempts to dispel the myth of women as victims and as never serving in combat roles in the military. From the early 1960s through 1988, the Air Force assigned women as missileers to launch nuclear intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). This task required that both men and women be placed in underground silos from locations within the United States (U.S.) that were geographically remote. Thus, during the Cold War, women were placed in direct combat positions in the event of a nuclear attack. Mazur (1998) sees this as akin to flying a combat aircraft, where today, Congress has relaxed the restriction in authorizing women to serve in combat positions but not in situations where they could encounter direct ground combat (Evertson and Nesbitt 2004). Direct ground combat is defined as “Engaging an enemy on the ground with individual or crew served weapons, while being exposed to hostile fire and to a high probability of direct physical contact with the hostile force’s personnel” (Aspin 1994 [as cited by Harrell et al. 2002, 3-4]). However, the term direct ground combat is fodder for varying interpretations as women have repeatedly engaged in combat, sanctioned or not.

Take Army Commander Captain Linda Bray, who, during Operation Just Cause led her unit by directly engaging the enemy (Titunik 2000). She quickly attained celebrity status and was branded by the media as the first female to lead troops into combat. But there was a backlash. News of this nature ordinarily would have been benign. But Bray was singled out, perhaps because of her gender, to the consternation of many in her unit who did not share in the accolades, perhaps because they were men. This speaks to Mazur’s (1998) point of the recurring novelty effect by the civilian media that women in the military experience, to their detriment, particularly in a culture that is communal. Sadly, amid the media hype and hostility that she encountered, Captain Bray left the military. In this case, the woman is either hailed as a heroine, or, in the case of PFC Jessica Lynch, reviled as a damsel in distress. Either view victimizes the woman and renders her at fault because, as Mazur (1998) puts it, she lacks full agency.

### *The Struggle for Full Agency*

For war to be successful, so says Sun Tzu in *The Art of War*, “...once people are unified, the brave cannot proceed alone, the timid cannot retreat alone. Good warriors seek effectiveness in battle from the force of momentum, not from individual people” [as cited by Titunik 2000, 235]. And Plato, in the *Republic*, likens training the guardian class to that of soldiers who like “noble dogs...gentle as can be with their familiars and people they know and the opposite with those they don’t know” [as cited by Titunik 2000, 237]. Such training would result in a force that “... would be best at fighting their enemies too because they would least desert one another, these men who recognized each other as brothers, fathers, and sons...And if the females join in the campaign too...I know that with all this they would be unbeatable” [as cited by Titunik 2000, 237, of the *Republic*, 417d]. In today’s military, winning or losing on the battlefield may well depend upon the presence of women.

Women have traveled a long and painstaking road since Molly Pitcher, the first known female to serve in combat during the revolutionary era in 1778; Fanny Dunbar Corbusier's life as an Army wife from 1869 through 1908; and they continue to be modern day exemplars of military service during Operation Iraqi Freedom through the likes of Lori Piestewa, the first Native American woman to be killed in combat (Holm 1992, Stallard 2003, Younge 2003). If a woman's place in the military is framed in terms of her right to call to arms as a free and full citizen in a democratic society, then she is indeed equal. Anything less would reduce her to that of a second class citizen. To consider gender integration in ways other than through the ideals and values of the citizen-soldier tradition is to undermine the civic responsibility of women, including their right to military service (Snyder 2003). By focusing less on gender and more on military effectiveness, we can then see how women, like men, contribute to the overall mission of the organization. Further, and according to Jeanne Holm (U.S. Air Force, Retired), the first female in the military to attain the rank of Major General in 1973, "Women's struggle for a place in the armed forces has been about seeking the full rights and responsibilities of citizenship. They have earned the right to the recruiting poster's promise and challenge: 'Be All You Can Be'" (GenderGap.com 2000). In essence, women's struggle is to achieve full agency. And if the military is to compete with the civilian sector for the best and brightest in society, then women must be portrayed accurately and treated equitably in all walks of life.

#### *The Challenges at Hand*

Today's military has been confronted with retaining certain segments of the population, particularly at the junior officer level; personnel with critical skills; and meeting recruiting goals (GAO, January 2001). Compared to women's representation of almost 46 percent of the civilian labor force for ages 18 to 44, women comprise approximately 15 percent of the military (Manning 2005, DoD 2007, Population Report 2006, See Table 1 for the composition of active duty and reserve female forces), and is still a minority of the total force (Stewart and Firestone 1992, Department of Defense (DoD) 1999). They are especially underrepresented among field grade officers and above. While the levels of all racial and ethnic groups have fluctuated over the years, with attrition occurring in all segments of the military's population, the number of white women exiting the military has been faster than any other group. Across all military branches, according to Charles Moskos in an unpublished study, white women, at 43 percent, have the highest attrition rate of any group (Park 1999). This compares to an attrition rate of 32 percent for white men (See Table 2 for the attrition rates of selected groups). White women also leave prematurely during their first term of enlistment at a stunning rate of 54 percent. And, the attrition for Army enlisted personnel who entered the military in fiscal year 2000 after 36 months, for instance, also reflected similar trends for white women at 46.7 percent (Per Charles Moskos via e-mail, January 7, 2005) (See Table 3 for the attrition rates of Army enlisted personnel for selected groups after 36 months). White female officers are the least likely of any group to remain in the military between promotion cycles and are somewhat less likely to be promoted (Hosek et al. 2001). However, reduced promotion rates for white female officers do not fully explain their attrition rates. White female officers are also less likely than white male officers to complete the necessary retention cycles.

**TABLE 1.** Female active and reserve forces for selected military groups by race/ethnicity (September 2005).

| <b>Active Duty</b>              |       |       |          |                    |                   |             |       |
|---------------------------------|-------|-------|----------|--------------------|-------------------|-------------|-------|
| Corps                           | White | Black | Hispanic | AI/AN <sup>*</sup> | A/PI <sup>†</sup> | > Two Races | Total |
| Officer (%)                     | 67.5  | 16.2  | 5.2      | 0.8                | 5.9               | 4.4         | 17.5  |
| Enlisted (%)                    | 48.5  | 30.9  | 10.3     | 2.2                | 5                 | 3           | 82.5  |
| Total women in the military (%) | 51.9  | 28.3  | 9.4      | 2                  | 5.2               | 3.2         | 100   |

  

| <b>Reserve</b>                  |       |       |          |       |      |             |       |
|---------------------------------|-------|-------|----------|-------|------|-------------|-------|
| Corps                           | White | Black | Hispanic | AI/AN | A/PI | > Two Races | Total |
| Officer (%)                     | 70    | 17.8  | 4.4      | 0.9   | 3.8  | 3.1         | 15.7  |
| Enlisted (%)                    | 55.5  | 27.4  | 9.6      | 1.5   | 3.9  | 2.1         | 84.3  |
| Total women in the military (%) | 57.8  | 25.9  | 8.8      | 1.4   | 3.9  | 2.3         | 100   |

<sup>\*</sup>AI/AN – American Indian/Alaskan Native

<sup>†</sup>A/PI – Asian/Pacific Islander

Source: Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute, *Annual Demographic Profile of the Department of Defense and U.S. Coast Guard, FY 2005*; *Population Representation in the Military Services FY 2004, May 2006*.

**TABLE 2.** Selected military groups' attrition rates by race/ethnicity and gender

| <b>Gender</b> | White | Black | Hispanic |
|---------------|-------|-------|----------|
| Female (%)    | 43    | 33    | 31       |
| Male (%)      | 32    | 32    | 26       |

Source: Park (1999) on Charles Moskos' unpublished study; email from Charles Moskos, January 2005.

**TABLE 3.** Army enlisted personnel attrition rates by race/ethnicity and gender for FY 2000.

| <b>Gender</b> | White | Black | Hispanic |
|---------------|-------|-------|----------|
| Female (%)    | 46.7  | 32.4  | 31.9     |
| Male (%)      | 27.1  | 21.8  | 18       |

*Source: Park Scott (1999) on Charles Moskos' unpublished study; email from Charles Moskos, January 2005.*

### **Theoretical Framework**

The literature points to a gnawing problem of retaining white females in the military. But the literature is too scant and fragmented in scope to determine the antecedents of this attrition; it suggests the occurrence as a consequence of attrition within the military's general population. The military acknowledges that female recruitment and retention have traditionally lagged behind that of men as a consequence of women's lower inclination to join the military; the ground combat exclusion directive; the military is a closed system that derives personnel, once recruited, from below and within its own ranks; and women leave the military at much higher rates than men (Population Report 2006). While this is true, there are a number of salient issues that contribute to the high rates of attrition among women, especially those of white women.

#### *Increasing Deployments: A Fact of Military Life*

A DoD wide survey of active duty military personnel showed that first term enlistees were less satisfied with military life than those at the mid point of their careers (GAO, December 2001). Forty-one percent and 35 percent, respectively, were dissatisfied and only 14 percent envisioned completing a 20 year career. Yet, the 52 percent and 62 percent of mid-career enlisted and commissioned officers who said that they were satisfied with the military is no indication of actual satisfaction. Here, satisfaction may be subsumed in sunk costs, or already vested time in the military. Multiple reports and articles have cited the current strain on troops (Burns 2007, National Security Advisory Group 2006, GAO, January 2007) as one of many culprits that is adversely impacting recruiting and retention. Studies specifically targeting women in the military have pointed to a multitude of problems compounded by the exponential increase in deployments or operation (s) tempo (OPSTEMPO) along with the personnel required for these deployments or personnel tempo (PERSTEMPO) (DACOWITS 2003). These challenges were already apparent prior to the operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Men, women, and their spouses, were also dissatisfied with family and personal issues that stemmed from multiple and back-to-back deployments (DACOWITS 2003). Many reported not receiving timely, accurate and accessible information. Problems were not limited to the Reserve and National Guard. But understanding how such deployments affect those in the Reserve and National Guard, their families and employers, is important

given the potential impact on recruitment, retention and the future of the force (Nataraj Kirby and Naftel 2000).

Despite the Army's family support and team building efforts, many families were unaware of such programs (Burrell et al. 2003). Army data suggest that how service members' families feel about the military can influence a service member's intent to stay or leave decision. This predicament is exacerbated by the dislocation of those in the Reserve and National Guard whose families usually reside beyond commuting distances to military installations. An analysis of deployment cites communication among service members, their units and commands, and family support services, as tantamount in helping service members to cope with separation and reunion due to deployments (National Military Family Services (NMFS) 2005). According to DACOWITS (2005), increasing deployments have been a major challenge for military personnel. The institution of many family-oriented programs to accommodate these changes has been insignificant, although where used, such programs have proven to be effective. Evidence of the impact of such programs is important in knowing how military members and their families adjust to the varying levels of deployments. The DACOWITS report has also established that the environment of increasing deployments, especially post-September 11, 2001, is the primary reason for personnel leaving the military. Service members saw the inordinate stress on their personal lives resulting in increasing divorce rates. And, for military women with children, longer deployments bring special challenges (The Joint Economic Committee 2007) that include dealing with the absence from their children as well as the accompanying adjustment problems of those children.

More women than men, and more first term enlistees than senior enlisted or commissioned officers, reported differential treatment on the job (DACOWITS 2003). Many females reported wanting flexibility in their careers, particularly during child bearing years. Further, when conflicts occur between family and career, more so in dual career military families with children, it is often the female who sacrifices her own career by prematurely leaving the military (Hosek et al. 2001).

### *The Service Academies*

Overall, military academies represent the least likely source of commission for women (DoD 1999, Segal and Wechsler Segal 2004, Population Report 2006)). However, women experienced higher attrition rates than men in both the Army's U.S. Military Academy and the Air Force Academy despite higher admission rates (GAO, September 1993, March 1994). And in both academies, women were far less likely to be chosen for top leadership cadet positions than their male cohorts. More often than not, male officers tended to rate female officers' leadership ability in terms of their physical ability (Hosek et al. 2001). As a consequence, many female officers reported either not being accepted and/or their abilities being questioned. A disproportionate number of females said that their treatment was differential. DACOWITS revealed that while male and female cadets generally agreed that gender integration was successful, there still existed "vestiges of resistance" by some in the academy (GAO, March 1994, 52). And while most perceived females to be treated as fairly as males, one-third of male cadets believed that female cadets received preferential treatment. A more recent study by the Inspector General of the Department of Defense (2005) confirmed this finding.

Beyond the academy, and at the operations level, retention patterns of officers indicate that such factors as age, race, gender, marital status, education level and source

of commission and occupation may impact decisions to stay or leave the military (Stone et al. 1998, Smith 2001). Officers with a graduate degree, for instance, were less likely to remain in either the Air Force or Navy when assessing the likelihood of doing so under the pre-1986 retirement system versus the retirement system enacted by the Military Retirement Reform Act of 1986, dubbed Redux (Smith 2001). The decrease in deferred compensation resulting in a reduction of retirement benefits such as those instituted by Redux, might influence an officer's leave decision.

In the Air Force, being under Redux tended to reduce the retention of officers, while in the Navy no comparable significant impact of Redux on retention was found. However, having a graduate education, contrary to Stone et al's (1998) finding, lowered the probability of retention in both the Air Force and Navy (Smith 2001). Smith suggested that this negative effect was likely due to the enhanced marketability of an officer's skill in the private sector and the desire to capitalize on it. In both services, being a military academy graduate was positive for retention, although the impact was only statistically significant for the Air Force. However, despite the special benefits that are allotted to military families, having dependents was negative for the retention of women in both services, but not for men. This negative effect may have reflected the propensity for women to leave the military when they encounter simultaneous conflicts between military commitment and family obligations.

#### *The Consequences of Gender*

Says Cooney et al (2003, 59) of Segal (1986) and Coser (1974), the military and the family are "greedy institutions" that make "total claims on their members." Both display these characteristics and place an unfair burden on women (Wechsler Segal 1986). Women are thus caught between satisfying the needs of their employers, their families and themselves. As a result, many women on active duty choose not to marry, or limit the number of children they have in order to minimize this conflict. And, given cultural norms, men are less likely to experience such "familial greed" (Cooney et al. 2003, 59).

Women in the military are less likely to have children, and among female officers, only 49 percent were married compared to 81 percent of male officers (Cooney et al. 2003)]. Data from 1991 and 1994 showed that for both years, female officers were more likely than male officers to have never been married. Female Army officers were less likely than male officers to marry and those who made a career of the Army were less likely than career male officers to have children (Westwood and Turner 1996, Hosek et al. 2001). Only 20.3 percent of female battalion Commanders had children compared to 98 percent of male battalion Commanders (Westwood and Turner 1996). Among enlisted women beyond the age of 25, the probability of marrying or having children decreased (Cooney et al. 2003). Similar trends exist for female officers. Respondents reported that the "amount of personal/family time you have" was the primary reason for them leaving the military (DACOWITS 2003, 10). A study by DACOWITS (2006) found that female physicians, attorneys and chaplains are exiting the military at unusually high rates between the fifth and eighth year tenure of service (Smith 2006). Female officers are less likely to remain in the military for at least a 20 year career (DACCOWITS 2003). And the likelihood of leaving the military increases with rank since a disproportionate number of female officers tend to be concentrated within the company grades (second lieutenant (01) through captain (03)).

### *Promotion Rates*

It appears that female officer promotions are on par with those of males at the junior ranks (DoD, June 2004). It also appears that at the senior officer and command levels (Lieutenant Colonel through Colonel (05-06)), female officer promotions decline. In the Navy, and more so in the Marines, women are less than half as likely as men to be promoted to the field grade and senior officer (05-06) levels. Yet, other sources show that, overall, DoD's promotion rates for the senior enlisted and field grade to senior officer ranks do not diverge significantly for men and women (DACOWITS 2005). The Air Force has traditionally attracted, retained and promoted more female officers to higher ranks than the other services (DoD 1999, Baldwin 1996). But the attrition of female officers, particularly within the company grades, adversely impact the available pool for accession to the field grades and senior ranks (Baldwin 1996). Such rank disparities point to problems in "historically male dominated institutions" (Baldwin 1996, 1).

Since not all occupations are open to women, such as those related to direct ground combat, women are denied career paths that put them in positions to compete with men for promotions (Baldwin 1996). Females are thus relegated to only adequate competition for promotions as they are not privy to the informal networks that make them more competitive (Kanter 1977). But in the Air Force, female promotions at the senior company to senior officer grades (03-06) compared to males, generally exceed those of male officers (Baldwin 1996). Although the higher promotion rates for females in the Air Force signal greater latitude and access to job assignments, female officers are still under represented in the military, and as stated, that gap increases significantly with rank. These rates vary with each service, with the Navy and Army reflecting greater promotion rates for male officers.

Ellefson (1998) views the military, in this case, the Army, as having too many inherent obstacles that block female junior officers' accession to senior ranks. Such obstacles include having women's competencies go unrecognized, exclusion from information networks and experiences that help to prepare women for upper level assignments, and being singled out as women rather than for their achievements.

### *Testing*

The Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB), a series of subject matter aptitude tests, is a deterrent to increasing the rates of women in the military (GAO, September 1999; Harrell et al. 2002; Ree and Carretta 1995). The battery unintentionally produces differential rates of success according to gender and largely determines what occupations prospective enlistees in the military will pursue. Bias consistently favored males as some sections of the ASVAB require prior exposure to the subject matter, not mental aptitude. This unfairly places prospective female enlistees at a disadvantage for successful performance as a whole. More technical sections of the battery require knowledge, for example, about the tools, systems and repair of automobiles. Females do not perform as well on these sections as they sometimes have little to no exposure to these subjects (GAO, September 1999). Yet the Air Force Officer Qualifying Test (AFOQT), used in its Officer Training School's (OTS) pre-commissioning program, showed a balance in scores for males and females across the board (Roberts and Skinner 1996). Final course grades yielded equivalent results for men and women. In other words,

there was little to no test bias between the AFOQT scores of men and women in OTS. But success on the ASVAB is key to enlistees pursuing certain career fields, so more enlisted men than enlisted women pursue technical career fields in the military. Moreover, the role of military recruiters may unintentionally direct females to traditional female-oriented career fields, and with the push for recruiting goals, this may very well be the case.

### *Unit Cohesion*

Unit cohesion, defined as comradeship or a kind of interpersonal bonding that is necessary among military members (Rosen et al. 1999) for meeting the unit's mission, is purported to contribute to female attrition. Yet studies have shown that women's integration in the military has had little to no discernible effect on unit cohesion, readiness and morale (Harrell and Miller 1997, Harrell et al. 2002). This is not to say that no negative effects have been experienced. Military leadership was perceived as more likely to influence unit cohesion. While gender does not adversely impact readiness, the pregnancies of unit members affected deployments but were not perceived as impeding the mission.

Gender became a secondary factor but only when conflicts within units were experienced (Harrell and Miller 1997). Gender within units was akin to separation according to rank or occupation, for instance. Leadership, not gender, was the overarching influence on unit morale. There was an increasing acceptance of women's integration in the military regarding basic training, though men and women favored segregated training. For sexual harassment, it did not matter to either gender whether they reported an incident to someone of a different gender. And, for non-traditional career fields for women or those formerly closed to women (i.e., tactical operations and infantry) (Harrell et al. 2002), over 80 percent of the women surveyed supported the loosening of such restrictions as combat exclusion but differed on whether or not inclusion in combat should be voluntary (Harrell and Miller 1997).

However, to discern whether or not women should be integrated into formerly closed positions, such as those in tactical operations and infantry, the results were mixed given the challenges that many of the services envisioned (Harrell et al. 2002). Such challenges, in the case of the Navy, include physically retrofitting ships to accommodate women, to not accepting women into certain career fields because the units to which these positions are assigned are considered direct combat and are therefore closed. These now opened career fields will take an average of 15 years for women to become fully integrated.

A meta-analysis of five Army units, from combat support to combat service support measuring the extent to which a relationship exists between gender composition and unit cohesion, was inconclusive (Rosen et al. 1999). While in some cases having an increased number of females resulted in some negative effects in some units, deployed and non-deployed, the overall findings were inconsistent. Further, given other influential factors such as race and rank, composition of some units, size of the unit, soldiers' support for the mission, the level of violence encountered in the theater of operations, and how the leadership impacted the treatment of each gender, the evidence was inconclusive that gender composition negatively impacts unit cohesion. Army studies too found that training performance was higher in gender-integrated than single-gendered units (U.S.

Army, May 2002). Recruits who failed to complete basic combat training were less committed to the Army and less confident of their abilities to succeed. Again, what appeared to matter most to training performance success was effective leadership. Thus, gender integration was not found to contribute to unit attrition.

A study of field grade officers (Major and Lieutenant Colonel) in the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) found that the more gender balanced the units, the less likely that female officers were under evaluated or not evaluated objectively on performance (Pazy and Oron 2001). When female officers were in the minority, they were more likely to be under evaluated. However, regardless of the gender proportion of the unit, male officers received “relatively constant” performance levels compared to their female peers (Pazy and Oron 2001, 698). In other words, token situations, or those that included minority groups, tended to produce the “underevaluation of women rather than the overevaluation of men.”

### *Sexual harassment*

Perhaps one of the most contentious issues in the military is sexual harassment. Incidents of sexual harassment call into question gender integration and a woman’s role in the military. The military itself has acknowledged that women’s role in the military is still largely an unsettled issue (DoD 2006). While many view sexual harassment as a malady that infects the larger society, others see it as particularly menacing for the military because the issue of whether or not women belong in the military is constantly being revisited.

Incidents of sexual harassment in the military appear to have declined from 1988 to 1995 (Firestone and Harris 1999) but this reduction in reported incidents may be a reflection of efforts to institute proactive preventive steps. However, sexual harassment is still pervasive in the military. Approximately 12 percent of men and 59 percent of women are affected. Other studies report as high as 35.8 percent for men and almost 71 percent for women who experience varying forms of sexual harassment (Antecol and Cobb-Clark 2001). The 2006 Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC) gender relations survey reflected a high level of sexist behaviors displayed by students at three of the U.S. military academies (McMahon presentation 2007).

The military considers sexual harassment punishable under the Uniformed Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), but the military’s environment is such that to report any negative incidents against one of its own, such as sexual harassment, is taboo. Men and women look to these perceived schisms of organizational justice and contradictions as gauges of their organization’s actual tolerance for maladaptive behavior (Adams-Roy and Barling 1998, Dekker and Barling 1998). In effect, the degree to which an organization invokes its policies on sexual harassment will determine the level of such incidents. It is this incidents level, and in turn perceived organizational justice for redress, that will influence whether or not women will report incidents of sexual harassment.

### **Toward a Theory of Attrition**

A number of issues purportedly conspire to support a theory of attrition. It is suggested that the reasons why females, particularly white females, leave the military prematurely, may be as follows.

### *Multiple Deployments*

Prior to Operations Enduring and Iraqi Freedom, and even before the Desert Shield/Storm campaigns, studies pointed to the increasing OPSTEMPO on military personnel and compromise to readiness as a result of back-to-back deployments (GAO 2001 and 2002, Mehay and Hogan 1998, McIntire Peters 1997, Reed and Segal 2000). Today, other reports, including those by the military (DACOWITS 2005), blame multiple deployments as the primary reason for attrition within its ranks. Specifically for female personnel, such voracious schedules, accompanied by the unpredictability of deployments, bring special challenges for those with children (DACOWITS 2005, National Security Advisory Group 2006, NMFS 2005) and in dual military families. Further, the installation of family programs that are largely left underutilized, have failed to bring about the desired effects. Communication has been shown to be what military personnel want most about impending deployments. Thus, these propositions follow to support a theory of attrition:

Proposition 1: As timely and as far out into the future as is possible on a need to know basis, military personnel should be continually apprised of possible or impending deployments. The more time that they are given to prepare for such movements, the more time they will have to get their personal affairs in order.

Proposition 1a: The more time that military personnel have to get their personal affairs in order, together with the coordination of the various family programs available to them, the less uncertain and pressured that they will feel about deployments.

### *Sexual Harassment*

What appears to encourage and even facilitate an environment of sexual harassment and thus the vilification of females is use by the military of certain female nouns to insult, threaten or offend males to instill in them the "warrior spirit." This tactic is used as part of the male socialization process, typically during basic training. Drill instructors routinely refer to recruits by such effeminate but insulting terms as "girlie," designed to break the recruit down (Snyder 2003, 192). "There can be few soldiers in the English-speaking world who have not, at some time or other, been called the bluntest of all Anglo-Saxon synonyms for what my dictionary terms "the female pudenda" (Holms in Acts of War, p. 47 [as cited by Snyder 2003, 192]). And a strategy often exercised by drill instructors on female recruits is to refer to them as "You wuss, you baby, you goddam female" (Bird Francke 1997, 155). These innuendos, while designed to incite and build the "warrior ethos," are offensive to women. For those who must tolerate such epithets, writing home about these experiences may not bode well with the civilian public.

Proposition 2: The less that new male recruits are exposed to derogatory comments about women during their indoctrination in basic training, the greater the likelihood that they will come to respect and value fellow female recruits as equal members of the military.

Proposition 2a: The less that new female recruits are exposed to derogatory comments about women during their indoctrination in basic training, the greater the likelihood that they will be accepted by fellow male recruits and will experience increased self-confidence as equal members of the military.

Women are three times more likely than men to experience sexual harassment, typically by a male supervisor of higher rank. Further, women in the military who are sexually harassed tend to be younger than the age of 25, unmarried with less than a college education, in a low pay grade, and on active duty.

Proposition 3: To the extent possible, the more balanced the ratio of female to male supervisors in both the commissioned and enlisted corps, the less the likelihood of incidents of sexual harassment among male and female personnel.

Since military academies represent one medium through which commissioned officers are indoctrinated, it becomes imperative that cultural change begin in these institutions and throughout a cadet's education. Other schools that serve as continuing development for each point of an officer's career must echo the same theme. This should also hold true for service schools that develop the enlisted corps.

Proposition 4: The greater the integration of each service's core values with the goals and missions of each service academy and service school for the development of the commissioned and enlisted corps, the greater the likelihood that they will inculcate a culture of respect for both male and female members of the military.

Proposition 4a: Over time, an increased acculturation of respect for fellow male and female members of the commissioned and enlisted corps will reduce the rates of attrition for both groups.

This culture of respect, aligned with that of the mission, can become infused into military communities as academy and other service school graduates deploy to their new assignments. And given that most academy admissions who are female are overwhelmingly white, this culture of respect may help to reduce attrition within this group while stabilizing retention over time. A similar trend would be expected for the enlisted corps.

### *Testing*

The Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) results in disparate impact on prospective female enlistees because of the differential rates produced in testing scores that disadvantages females and in turn determines what occupations that female enlistees pursue.

Proposition 5: The earlier that girls are introduced to such technical subjects as automotive/shop, the sciences, mathematics and the like in elementary and high school, the greater the likelihood that they will perform as well as or better than prospective male enlistees on the ASVAB and other military entrance examinations.

Proposition 5a: Increased exposure to technical subjects in elementary and high school will increase the likelihood that girls, at higher rates, will desire to pursue these subjects in more technical careers and in the military.

Proposition 5b: Targeted recruitment by military recruiters to encourage qualified female enlistees to pursue technical careers in the military will increase their exposure and representation in these careers in the military.

Proposition 5c: The greater the representation of females in more technical careers in the military, the greater the stabilization of their retention rates over time to enable the completion of full career cycles (an average of 15 years) within each career field.

Proposition 5d: The greater the stabilization of retention rates over time to enable the completion of full career cycles (an average of 15 years) within more technical career fields, the greater the likelihood that women will become more visible within all ranks of these career fields.

#### *Unit Cohesion*

Without unit cohesion, the extent to which unit members are committed to the mission may be compromised and could in turn adversely impact military effectiveness. It has been found that the presence of women in these units has little to no discernible negative effect on unit cohesion (Harrell et al. 2002) and gender-mixed units outperform single gender units in training (U.S. Army 2002). Key to unit cohesion is the quality of its leadership.

Proposition 6: The more fair that a unit's leadership is perceived to be in terms of the treatment of its members by the unit leader (s), the greater the likelihood for unit cohesion, regardless of the size of the male to female ratio in that unit.

#### *Relationship with the Media*

The media has been an important conduit through which policy inconsistencies and indiscretions of the military have been exposed. However, the media has also brought unnecessary attention to and has derailed the careers of many model military women. The white female has been the most demonized in the civilian media. This may unwittingly represent punishment for what society views as an unconventional route for women in the military, especially white women. And it is the white female, for all intents and purposes, who has been the face of women in the military. The plight of Army Captain Linda Bray and PFC Jessica Lynch are only two of many examples of the recurring novelty effect brought about as a result of women's minority status in the military (Mazur 1998).

The experience of one female veteran, Sergeant Leigh Ann Hester, signals the lengths to which women in the military, particularly those in non-traditional occupations, will go to downplay any special attention to themselves. Sergeant Hester, a soldier serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom, received the Silver Star for valor, and is the first female so honored since World War II (Lumpkin 2005). Yet, when interviewed by the media, Sergeant Hester humbly replied, "I am honored to even be considered, much less awarded, the medal. It really doesn't have anything to do with being female. It's about

the duties I performed that day as a soldier” (Lumpkin 2005, 1). To do otherwise, or in this case to acknowledge individual achievement, would be to disregard the work of Sergeant Hester’s fellow detail (work) members. In the military, this action would be deemed as potentially distracting from the mission.

This kind of attention or repeated novelty treatment from the civilian media may then help to explain why the military goes to great lengths to reinforce its protocol for handling the media. Personnel are instructed to direct the media to the services’ Office of Public Affairs when approached for information. In this way, it is hoped, that publicity will be subject to the scrutiny of the military and framed in a manner that the military desires for such messages to be conveyed.

Proposition 7: Increased and continual education about the military by each service’s Office of Public Affairs to the civilian media may serve to facilitate a decrease in the amount of sensational coverage and increase balanced reporting about the military, especially with regard to the unnecessary attention given to military women.

### *Targeted Recruitment*

One reason why female enlistees and cadets in military academies have high attrition, particularly during early indoctrination, can be attributed to low or lack of good physical conditioning. Over 71 percent of the females who separated from the military between their seventh and forty-eighth month of enlistment did so because of medical or physical problems (Moore 2002). Many male officers, as well as some female officers, believed that women do not possess the physical or emotional attributes for military service, much less combat (Hosek et al. 2001). Most questions about a woman’s ability for military service tend to concern physical capacity.

Proposition 8: The more that female enlistees and officer candidates physically condition prior to entering basic training, the service academies or Office Training/Candidate Schools, the greater the likelihood for the successful completion of such training.

### **Conclusion**

If women in the military continue to experience such indignities as sexual harassment, they may become convinced, rightly or wrongly, that their presence is unwanted. The consequences could become dire and result in the further erosion of current force levels. It could also become impossible to achieve parity in even those support occupations that women traditionally occupy. This imbalance may have a domino effect on civilian females who are also employed by the military. Additionally, because how a spouse feels could inevitably influence that of the service member, many women, in support of all women in the military, may encourage their spouses to leave the institution.

The military may be perceived as a hostile work environment for women. Parents will discourage this endeavor for their children. The military could in turn lose the support of the public, thus furthering the civilian-military divide. The consequence may be that, given the already small number of those in Congress who have ever donned the military uniform, support for funding for the military, may decline. Current operations in Iraq and Afghanistan may also cause recruiting and retention to reach crisis levels, especially for the Army and Marines.

The military's problem with white female attrition is not limited to this group; attrition occurs in all groups. However, what makes white female attrition disconcerting is that like white males, white females represent a majority of the civilian population from which most recruits are drawn. If white women are leaving the military at rates faster than they can be recruited and retained, the solution may lie in exploring novel approaches to counteract the problem. Women view the military, for the most part, as a vehicle for securing college funding and job training (Moore 2002). But unlike other groups, white females may well see opportunities within the civilian sector as exceeding those of the military, and unlike minorities, male or female, white females do not view the military as a viable career option. Also, unlike minorities, including minority women, white women do not necessarily benefit in the civilian sector from serving in the military (Cooney et al. 2003). In fact, as reflected in post military earnings, young white females may be penalized for military service (Mehay and Hirsch 1996, Segal and Wechsler Segal 2004). Ironically, white females are the most supportive of gender equality in the military than any other group (Wilcox 1992). And, younger females who came of age following the women's movement, expressed more support for women in combat and non-traditional roles. Therefore, it becomes counterproductive for the military to alienate the very group that supports gender integration the most but who increasingly finds the military to be unreceptive to women in general.

The problems of the military are magnified by the civilian media and may have an adverse impact on recruitment and retention. Balanced reporting is important because public support for the military tends to be gauged along perceived risks and gender stereotyped roles (Wilcox 1992). Educating the public about the military, specifically with regard to the critical role of women in the institution, should then become an imperative in helping to bridge the civilian-military gap.

#### *Policy Recommendations*

Difficulty in attracting white women to the military may lie in how white women perceive that the military will treat them given what information, positive or negative, they glean from the media. Not taking steps, however, to thwart misinformation may have deleterious effects on recruiting and retention. In accordance with Mazur's (1998) agency theory, it appears that, despite high attrition, white females may simply be exercising full agency. While their attrition might be accelerated by actual experience once they join the military, white women are perhaps leaving the military earlier because unlike minorities, including minority males, they can. But the military relies on this important constituency and should explore innovative ways to mitigate their premature exodus. Heeding the calls of the aforesaid propositions that postulate a theory of attrition to explain the reasons for white women's premature separation from the military may help to obviate their attrition patterns. Bridging the civilian-military divide may be crucial and the military should educate the public about its culture by way of the media. Doing so could result in the media employing more measured and less salacious coverage. Such tempered approaches will in turn provide the public with a balanced view of the institution.

There should be a more reasoned approach to basic training. This in no way implies that training should be compromised in terms of rigor. But the routine use of sexist epithets by drill instructors as a tactic to break down and build up recruits should

discontinue. Further, this language is used at a time when recruits are most developmentally vulnerable. One cannot denigrate one-half of society and expect that recruits, once they have graduated from the various military schools will immediately assume a respectful stance toward those they were acculturated to disrespect. An environment of respect coupled with discipline can be infused early in the indoctrination process. Military school graduates, once they deploy to duty assignments, can continually serve as agents for this message.

The increasing visibility of females in positions of power as well as their presence in non-traditional occupations could markedly influence how males and females relate in the military. The perceived equity in roles that each gender plays may help to reduce incidents of sexual harassment. In turn, a culture of respect must be inculcated into the service academies, training schools and basic training. These institutions can then become opportunities for cultural change.

To increase retention, military recruiters should target those who are most inclined to be physically conditioned. This selectivity could increase the likelihood for completing the demanding requirements for training and reduce the number and severity of physical injuries.

Military leadership, not gender composition, is key to unit cohesion. The more effective that a unit's leadership is perceived to be, the greater the likelihood for unit cohesion. Such bonding can contribute to the degree to which military personnel identify with their units and may prove vital for retention.

The military should adopt gender-neutral policies to encourage the retention of dual career military families. More importantly, the military can institute programs concerning the unique challenges of being female and in the military. Military Commanders should be educated about the nuances that military females experience with work and life conflicts, childbearing, and how these anomalies may impact deployment (Pierce 1998, Nataraj Kirby and Naftel 2000, NMFS 2005, The Joint Economic Committee 2007). The military can also do a better job of promoting family friendly programs already in place, particularly those that support the Reserve and National Guard. Similar programs can be instituted for young and single military personnel.

The military can make it costly to leave for those approaching or at the mid-point of their careers (Payne et al. 2002). Officers, particularly those with families, will look at time and money already invested in the institution before choosing to move on, and may opt to remain through retirement. Similar programs can be designed for the enlisted corps to receive educational benefits as an incentive to re-enlist or extend enlistment. However, failure to fulfill one's enlistment contract should result in the recipients' remunerating the military for the cost of such benefits.

Finally, employing the above strategies could have policy implications for recruiting and retention. Given the current level of active research on the military, and for the military to maintain viable force levels, it is hoped that more of such novel strategies will be developed to offset attrition while stabilizing retention over time. These strategies will be especially critical in attracting and retaining white females in both the commissioned and enlisted corps.

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