

Investigating Gender Exclusivity in the Military using CHAT

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Abstract

This paper examines the potential causes of gender exclusion and the tension women face within the military today by drawing upon Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) to examine the interaction of mediating tools within the military, as well as cultural and historical factors, that inhibit gender inclusivity. Using this theory, contradictive elements within the activity system of gender inclusivity will emerge to spotlight areas of future research into women's activity in the military and the role they play as an underrepresented part of the organization. This will hopefully lead to finding areas of expansive transformation regarding how women learn and survive in the male-dominated working environment of the military.

Keywords: *Military, Gender, CHAT*

Although opportunities for women have greatly increased over the past several decades, barriers still exist for women who serve and lead within the military today (Carreiras, 2006; Maung, Nilsson, Berkel, & Kelly, 2017; Morral, Gore, & Schell, 2015; Turchik, Bucossi, & Kimerling, 2014). Exposing these barriers requires first shining a spotlight on women and observe their activity within the organization. This paper looks at the potential causes of gender exclusion and the tension that women face within the military today by drawing upon Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) to examine the interaction of mediating tools within the military, as well as cultural and historical factors that inhibit gender inclusivity. From this, I then employ CHAT to spotlight potential contradictive elements within the activity system of gender inclusivity to determine areas of future research into women's activity in the military and the role they play as the underrepresented part of the organization. This will hopefully lead to finding areas of expansive transformation regarding how women learn and survive in the male-dominated working environment of the military.

Background and Problem

While the military has worked diligently to establish policies that enforce equality and accommodation for women in the military, women continue to experience bias in the workplace, sexual harassment and assault because of their gender (Keller, Hall, & Matthews, 2018). This review attempts to answer how military women, who are in the vast minority, participate and contribute to the construction of knowledge and culture as an underrepresented group within the male-dominated organization of the military.

Culture

Culture remains a very powerful and influential force within an organization's structure and can have a tremendous influence on the beliefs, values and standards of that organization (Schien, 2010; Tierney, 1988). To get to the heart of how an organization operates, one cannot neglect to examine the organizational culture that is accepted and nurtured. However, within this culture

can lie tensions and disagreements from underrepresented groups that may go undiscussed and unnoticed by the majority. These minorities may feel the need to simply go along with the majority culture in order to fit in and survive. William Tierney (1988) observed this while interviewing underrepresented subjects recently hired as faculty at an institute of higher education: “When they hire someone here, they don’t want only someone who can do the job, but someone who will also fit in with the personality of the place” (p. 11). Therefore, a tense silence caused by culture conformity may be a learned behavior for some underrepresented groups who do not believe they fit within the culture established by the majority.

Gender Performance

Melissa Herbert (1998) described another reaction caused by the pressures of culture conformity utilized by women in the military. In her book she observed how women manage and perform their gender within the military’s male-dominated organization. Herbert’s assertions lean heavily on Candace West and Don Zimmerman (1987) who stated that gender is a “routine, methodical, and recurring accomplishment” (p. 126) within society. Their belief is that gender is socially created and can therefore be altered given differing societal and organizational expectations and situations. Herbert’s work also leans heavily on Joan Acker’s (1990) identification of gendered organizations.

Herbert (1998) studied roughly 300 female military members through interviews and questionnaires in the 1990s. She posited that the military was indeed a gendered organization, and this phenomenon had an impact on how women behaved from a gender performance management standpoint. Her main thesis dealt with the phenomenon of females operating within the male-dominated military organization who were routinely forced to make gender decisions and negotiate the fine line between acting “too feminine” and “too masculine” in order to be accepted, respected, and not penalized as the underrepresented gender within that organization. Through her interviews, she identified that 70% of the female military members who participated in the study admitted to employing one or more feminine strategies to ensure their male counterparts knew they were female. To a much lesser degree, Herbert found that 13% of her participants felt the need to employ masculine strategies, while 17% balanced the art of employing both feminine and masculine strategies (p.103). The feminine strategies employed ranged from their choice of wearing feminine uniforms (e.g., skirts instead of pants), lack of use of profanity, lack of socializing with males, and making public their romantic relationships.

The results from this study more than 20 years ago lead to interesting questions today. Do women in the military today believe gender performances are still necessary in order to survive and thrive in their environment? Even though the military has improved its policies over the past 20 years to accommodate, protect, and value women who serve in the military, gender bias, sexual harassment, and assault continue to be key factors that drive women away from the military (Turchik et al., 2014). These results appear to lead to other elements within the military leading to this contradiction. Therefore, CHAT may be a useful model to examine and identify contradictory elements hindering the objective of gender inclusivity in the military.

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory Background

To answer these questions, I will look at CHAT to examine potential contradictory areas that exist between the gender-inclusive military policies and continued gender-exclusive activities within the military. Specifically, I use the activity theory model as developed by Yrjö Engström (2014). Engström has significantly contributed to the contemporary understanding of activity theory and views its evolution in three generational developments (Engstrom, 1999, 2014). His model incorporates the Vygotskyan concept of the subject—object relationship mediated by tools, signs, and instruments, and factors in the collective activity of rules, communities, and division of labor within the structure of human activity to provide meaning to that activity and produce an outcome.

Figure 1 illustrates Engstrom’s (1987) triad structure of the activity system. Engstrom’s (2001) activity model is also summarized by five main principles. First, the activity system is the primary unit of analysis and, therefore, activity of the subject toward the object is influenced by the contributions of all of the elements within that activity. Second, each activity system is multi-voiced and has different perspectives and interests. Third, each activity system has historicity and only transforms over lengthy periods of time. Fourth, contradictions exist through tensions within the elements of the system. Lastly, these contradictions can lead to change and expansive transformation of the entire activity system.

By examining all elements within the activity system to include the impact that rules, community, and the distribution of work and power have within the military to foster (or inhibit) gender-inclusivity, I hope to reveal points of contradiction that can serve as an indicator for expansive transformation and learning within this activity system.

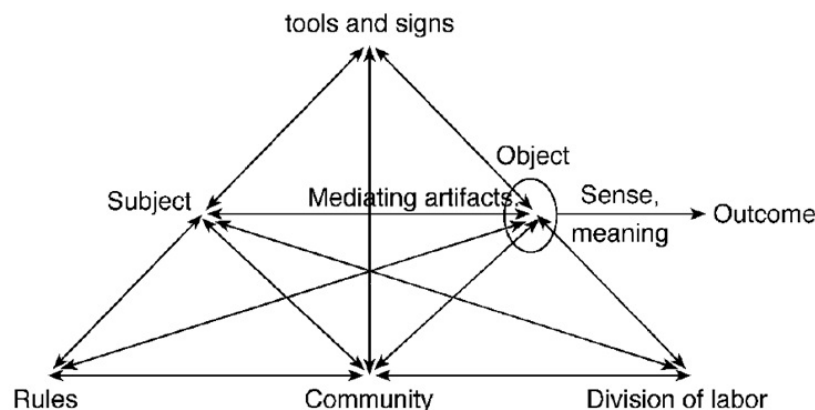


Figure 1. The Structure of the Human Activity System (Engström, 1987, p. 78).

CHAT and Women in the Military

To examine the activity of gender inclusivity within the military, I first assign the woman officer as the subject. In CHAT, the subject is the human agent(s) whose perspective drives the analysis of the activity. One could argue that in order to address the complete issue of gender-inclusivity all women in uniform must be included. . While this is true, a better place to start will be with

officers, whose placement in leadership positions can influence the activity. Next, I assign the Object as “becoming gender-inclusive.” The object directs the activity and is the primary motive of the subject. Engström (1997) described the subject as the “raw material” or “problem space” (p. 67) that the subject is steadily changing into an outcome. Creating and making meaning of a gender-inclusive workplace certainly fits the monumental task that military women face today. There is a sense of unfinished work between the subject and object as tools and community constantly provide voice and parameters to help the subject make sense of the object. The tools are the means by which the subject carries out the activity. In this example, tools can be language in the workplace, uniforms, and artifacts such as squadron emblems and morale uniform patches that are derogatory toward women and have been since banned in the military. These tools serve to mediate the activity between the subject and object and are culturally situated or a “repository of culture” (Roth & Lee, 2007, p. 203).

Rules are the cultural norms and policies that further direct the subject and mediate between the subject and the community. In this example, the rules are policies and cultural norms that both formally and informally dictate accepted behaviors. All officers, both actively in the military and retired, are considered “community” in this example. Since the community shares the same object-motive as the subject in the CHAT model, female officers who encourage and persuade the subject to continue working toward the objective. The division of labor refers to both vertical and horizontal separations of responsibilities and hierarchies within the system. In this case, the vertical separations are the hierarchal structures of the military, while the horizontal separations refer to the division of tasks between officers of the same rank.

Lastly, the outcome is the intended or unintended results of the activity. One outcome in this example could be the inclusion of women into more leadership positions, higher ranks, and combat positions historically reserved for males. However, one unintended outcome may be continued gender exclusiveness, gender performance, and sexual harassment in the workplace.

Conclusion and Future Studies

From these assignments into the CHAT model, I get the design depicted in Figure 2. I can begin to examine potential contradictive elements within the activity model that can direct the discovery of areas of expansive transformation regarding how females in the military learn and survive in male-dominated working environments. This will require further research to validate, but initially I can see three potential contradictions to be investigated further. First, there is a potential contradiction between the “multi-voicedness” of the community and the subject. There may be competing dialogue and narratives within the community that cause structural tensions between the community and the subject. These may include voices from retired male officers advocating for gender exclusivity while retired women officers advocate for the opposite. Second, there may be a contradiction between the mediating tools and the subject. Given the separate standards (grooming, uniform, physical fitness, etc.) for men and women, this has the potential to cause contradictions as the subject mediates toward the motive of gender inclusivity equipped with tools that are gendered.

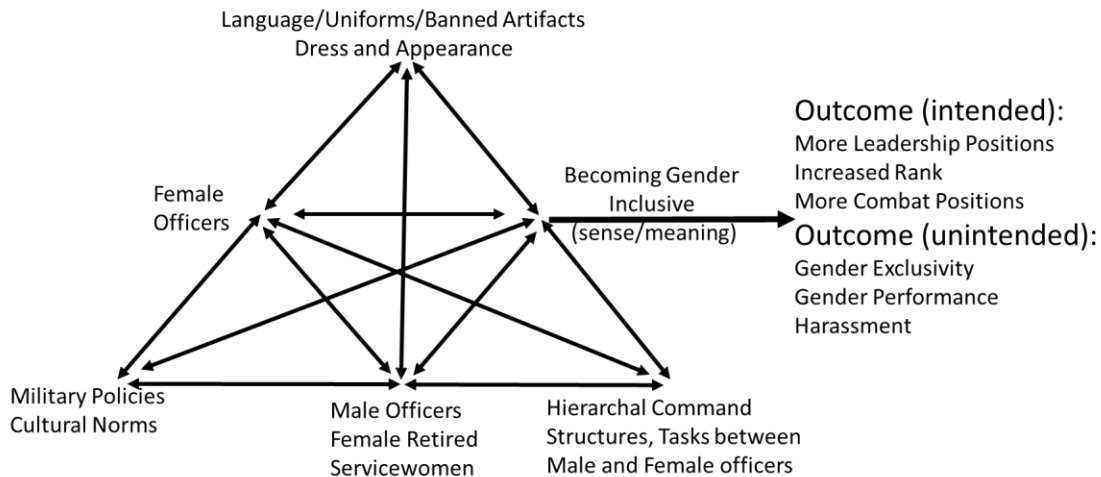


Figure 2. The general activity system of gender inclusivity in the military

Lastly, there may be tension and contradiction between the policies and cultural norms and the subject. The military has worked to create a more gender-inclusive environment for women from opening combat positions to accommodating women’s lifestyle and family decisions. However, has the culture changed enough within the male-dominated organization to accommodate, accept, and even applaud these policy changes?

The purpose of this paper was to examine the potential causes of gender exclusion that still exist within the military today. I drew upon Cultural-Historical Activity Theory to examine mediating tools, as well as cultural and historical factors, within the military that may foster or inhibit the activity of gender inclusivity within the military. I then attempted to inspect the relationships within the structure to spotlight potential contradictory elements within the activity model that could lead to areas of learning and expansive transformation regarding how females in the military learn and survive in male-dominated working environments.

For future studies, I intend to conduct a qualitative analysis of female officers attending the three schools within Air University: Squadron Officer College (SOC), Air Command and Staff College (ACSC), and Air War College (AWC). The data collection will consist of surveys, interviews, and focus groups. The intent of the analysis is to observe and determine if women in the military today still believe gender performances are necessary for survival, learning, and contribution within the organization and to determine what factors inhibit gender inclusivity within the military. From this analysis, I will be able to validate the contradiction assumptions made above and will be able to pinpoint how women in the military learn and survive in male-dominated working environments.

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