

Reflection Paper: Social Analysis

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I will explore the subordinates in my office as a social group. I will describe this group, examine their mediating structures, look at their life chances, consider their values/issues and conclude by reflecting on their social circumstances in light of my Catholic tradition.

The function of our office is to take care of all the computer systems in our military organization. It is a new office, combining related, though different functions from three formerly separate offices. Manning these offices are eight men and one woman in four different, but related disciplines. The duties each of the four groups delineate their functional responsibilities. The first has two people and are the computer, networking and programming experts. These are the most qualified, well rounded, functional experts of the nine. The second are four database managers who are also computer and networking technicians with limited programming in the database they manage. Third are two who manage two servers and associated equipment including a radio frequency-based wireless connection. The last is a computer and networking technician who is also an administrative specialist and works with the first two listed. They cover a range in rank, identified by pay grade from E3 through E6, the E3 being the newer enlisted airman and the E6, the seasoned veteran. The age ranges and marital status are three married E6s range between 34 and 40; two married E5s in their mid-twenties; one married E4 age 22; and three E3s between the ages of 20 and 24, one of which is married. By position, the eldest E6 is the senior military in the office and my assistant. I have provided a supervisor/sub-ordinate breakdown in table 1 following their particular office function.¹ Geographically they are from Idaho, Louisiana, California, Washington, Oklahoma, the Philippines and Mexico. Their cultural backgrounds are

Filipino, Mexican, European and African American and their religious traditions include Protestant and Catholic with some who do not have a particular tradition or practice. They range in education from High School graduates with some college to students pursuing Bachelors degrees and several additionally have or are working on computer certifications.

All of the people in this study are active-duty, enlisted Air Force. Part of the oath they pledge is to "...support and defend the constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic..." (DoD). The oath combines with the Uniform Code of Military Justice and the Manual for Courts Martial to subject the member to a rule of law that, in some respects, is very different from the civilian laws of our country. A couple of examples can illuminate some of the differences. The recent Supreme Court ruling in *Lawrence and Garner v. Texas, case no. 02-0102*, in which a Texas sodomy law was struck down reflects current thinking in civilian law (CNN). To the contrary, it is against military law for admittance of homosexuality or be caught practicing a homosexual lifestyle. Those who disclose or are act upon it will be discharged. Sodomy is a sexual practice of the homosexual and the Supreme Court's ruling reflects the significant difference between civilian and military law in the United States. A final example of military law differing from civilian is called *fraternization*. This law does not allow enlisted and commissioned people to have personal relationships with one another. In one instance, I witnessed this kind of relationship that grew into marriage. Before officials knew of the relationship, the enlisted member was able to be discharged. While a person in, say, the corporate world who dates his or her boss might be suspected of

trying to curry favor for a better position, these rules, written or unwritten, do not have the same force of law as in the military case and so are at least different in degree.

Another similarity between Air Force enlisted members is education. The value this service places on education to ensure a well-trained force can be seen in that it funds the only two-year, regionally accredited college in the military: the Community College of the Air Force. This school is driven by training goals, not profit, and a substantial number of Air Force training courses meet accreditation standards and provide college credits. This college also accepts credits from other accredited schools that meet content standards set by school policy. In order to be promoted to senior enlisted positions that are capped at a percentage of the enlisted force by Congress making them very competitive, personnel must have an Associates degree from this community college, at minimum. The education levels for Air Force active duty enlisted personnel as of July 2003 as listed in table 2 below reflect more than 86% have some college with 21% of this number with at least an Associates degree (HQ, Statistics).² Those with unknown education levels arguably provide an error rate of just over three percent. If the 86 percent with some college is extended to the percentage of unknowns, assuming a similar breakdown in micro as in macro, would reflect that an approximate 88.5% of the enlisted force have at least 15 semester hours. These numbers do not indicate how many are actively pursuing college work, yet in my experience, I have witnessed many people pursuing their education while simultaneously working a full time job. In the social group being studied, at least seven of nine are actively pursuing accredited courses of study to further their education.

A final similarity is the taking responsibility for one's actions. One of the prime causes of this from my own experience as an airman is the corrective nature of the military organization, referring particularly to military judicial and non-judicial punishment. The purpose of these correctives is to teach one to do the right thing for the right reason, no matter who may or may not be watching. While this might be the intent, the existence of judicial and non-judicial actions reflect this has not been achieved, hence the need for these correctives. As members of this service, they represent the base and service at all times, as is borne out in the common saying, "you are Air Force 24/7." This means each person is subject to the military rules and law at all times. For example, one who does not wear the proper safety gear or fails to operate a motorcycle safely are subject to the same rules on or off the installation, in their uniform or other attire. In this instance, an accident could result in some form of correction and a line-of-duty determination regarding insurance and medical costs. In another example, if a member is not properly wearing the uniform by not donning the hat while outside, on or off the installation, they would receive some form of non-judicial punishment to correct the practice. After describing the social group in detail, I want to examine the mediating structures and then the life chances.

Mediating structures, as Michael Cowan indicates, are the complex structures of our society to which we belong (Cowan 69-71). We will discuss four for this social group: the military, popular opinion, Congressional funding, and the world situation. The military is primary due to the extent of direct control it exerts over the lives of those in the group. It provides employment, rules of conduct, and laws. It determines if they remain home to spend time with their families and pursue their goals or sends them on

travel to locations which may not provide the resources to accomplish their goals. For example, in the ongoing war against terrorism President Bush announced after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Air Force personnel have deployed to war zones in several countries and regions supporting this war. Those deployed to a war zone do not necessarily have time to pursue their educational objectives. This can be highlighted from the well-known story in which the Army support unit was ambushed and its members taken prisoner. Another way the military exerts control over the members' life can be highlighted by the non-judicial punishment a first-line supervisor can administer should the subordinate break the rules. The person who refused to wear the uniform properly could be given extra duty, for example, providing incentive to correct this deficiency.

The next mediating structure is popular opinion. Popular opinion as I am using it refers to the basic expression of support or criticism by the country as a whole about our military and links the people in it have with the public. The link of the military citizen with the public usually comes in the form of people these members know in the community in which they live. Citizen opinion is shaped by the discussions in public forums such as television, newspapers, the internet, by public figures, and by the individuals in the military they know. When popular support for the military and its people wanes, identifying oneself as a military member could bring on opposition, sneers and jeers, and even erupt into physical violence as has happened in the past. For example, returning troops from Vietnam were met with suspicion and disapproval. There were some well-known, high profile critics of this conflict such as Jane Fonda. In that kind of atmosphere, this is similar to when the military member is living in a foreign

country, having to blend in with the local populace so as not to be made a target. Congressional funding is influenced and, to a certain extent, determined by popular opinion. Popular support for the military is likely to increase Congressional funding for the military and make for a warm welcome. Negative popular opinion of the military might reduce military funding and cause the military member to be at best, tolerated and at worst, not welcome or personally attacked. When funding is cut, personnel and/or equipment are reduced resulting in an increase in workload and stress and/or a decrease in new equipment and increasing maintenance and upkeep costs as equipment ages. Now let us consider the life chances of the members of this group.

Life chances are the social circumstances within which we live (Cowan 66-69). Those for this social group to be considered are camaraderie, education, travel, diversity, and computer expertise. The first one means being willing to put your life in another person's hands and vice versa, creating deep respect for the person and their abilities. Hence, fighting alongside another in a conflict creates a true, life-long friend. One of the reasons is because in the heat of a battle in an unfamiliar place, the people are the only 'thing' familiar. In times of great stress such as this setting, the familiar become like family. These bonds teach one what the substance of true friendship is and this knowledge equips them to be successful. Education is made extremely available to those in the Air Force. Upon entry into the military, training is provided for just about everything and much of that training meets the accreditation standards that are worth college credit. At virtually every level of promotion, there is some kind of professional military education provided. There are education counselors on every base to help military individuals determine what they need to complete their Associates degree and

counselors from other universities who advise on degree programs they offer. The Air Force provides materials and tests at no cost to obtain college credits from self-study and the Air Force pays all tuition up to a certain dollar amount per credit hour for classes. The member pays for books if they take a class. The Montgomery GI Bill provides up to 36 months of education benefits of \$900 per month for an initial contribution of \$1200 (HQ, GI Bill and Veterans).

The third life chance is travel, something most experience. Experiencing different ways of living opens a wide world for those who do so, opening the door for critical reflection giving one an opportunity to choose one's lifestyle, beliefs, and practices. Appropriation of new and re-appropriation of previously learned values, beliefs, and practices makes for a more mature, self-directed person. Travel also leads one to experience the fourth life chance, diversity. As a result of my own travel, even though I was raised an Irish-German New Yorker, I am a composite from my experiences living in Asia, throughout the United States and Canada and across Europe. Experiencing a diversity not only allows re-appropriation of one's own practices and beliefs, but also enables one to question one's practices and beliefs even after a composite is created. The effect is that the self is always being recreated, better equipping one to deal with change, one of the only constants in life.

The final area to consider is their computer expertise. In my experience as one who has worked in the industry for nearly 20 years, computer work forces the one who does it to organize well and be able to multitask, a computer term meaning to do several things at once and to juggle many responsibilities within limited time constraints. When a computer technician gets to the point when he or she can refine a program and modify

its code, their whole outlook about computer work changes and they become able to identify software reasons for computer problems, making them much more successful than their contemporaries who cannot program at all. Most of the people in the group we are examining can program. All these factors make the life chances of this group very high, making them much more marketable in the workforce, healthier, knowledgeable of how to deal with people, supervise, and manage change from their training and experience. Now let us examine this social group's values/issues and the social control it exerts.

The values of this social group I would like to consider are goals, performance and conformance. Each member has a set of goals to accomplish in the office, for example. I expect my people set these goals for the performance of the office in consensus and modify them to reach objectives as set by the Air Force or local management. Air Force life is performance-based. In dealing with computers and networks primarily, the measure the Air Force uses to determine how well each part of our office performs is user satisfaction and the ability to use the systems as designed. Conformance is the ability to adapt to the demands and requirements of the Air Force. We must adapt our practices to Air Force standards in computer and network security, for example. The way we reflect this is through data reflecting percentage of computers updated, in the previous example. As rules, approaches, and expectations change, this organization expects the people to adapt and conform to these new requirements. Finally, I will examine several areas discussed above in light of my Catholic faith.

In light of my Catholic tradition, I would like to reflect upon several areas. The Air Force goes to war to carry out the policy set by the Commander-in-Chief to counter a

threat to safeguard our way of life and defend others, adding to the stability of the world. The Catholic just-war theory provides a basis to justify going to war. Because there are variants of opinion, it could be argued not every fight America has ever had has been justified. Desert Storm is one example when the American decision and Catholic Church teaching coincided. Air Force members are not free to refrain as a matter of conscience when the war breaks out, but they must make these decisions before they join the all-volunteer force. In contrast, the Catholic is responsible to evaluate each case as it comes up. A Catholic in the military can come in conflict between conscience and obeying orders because the Air Force and Church do not always agree.

The next area is the policy toward the disclosure or practice of homosexuality. The Catholic tradition states that a homosexual orientation is different from homosexual practice, the former being the way they were created, the latter being sinful. As with any sin, the Catholic Church recommends the sacrament of confession and the striving to live a holy life. Air Force policy agrees that homosexual practice is unacceptable. Air Force policy diverges from the Church in that it discharges those disclosing or practicing. The Catholic approach is to apply a corrective to one living a homosexual lifestyle, only using excommunication as a last resort.

The next issue, doing the right thing for the right reason, corresponds to the Catholic teaching that the believer should be consistent between faith and living life. Representing the Air Force 24/7 is an identification issue consonant with Catholic tradition that we are Catholic at all times and places. The extent of control the military exerts over its members is similar to Jesus' giving the Church, in Peter, authority. He does this, for example, by giving Peter heaven's keys and the power to bind and loose

(NAB Matt 16:19). “Simon Peter is the keeper of the keys, the one who has power to ‘bind’ and to ‘loose,’ to allow or to forbid,” for he was the rock upon which Jesus said he would build his Church (Notes 1067). The difference is the Air Force does not claim infallibility and authority was not given by Divine decree. In travel and diversity, there are many similarities between Air Force and Catholic experience. The Air Force provides a code of conduct which does not vary with locale. The same is true for the Catholic, who is called to live according to the moral law. While local procedures for a particular Base may vary from Base to Base, there are sets of operating instructions that are the core for all installations and do not vary. In the same way, the Mass has its core practice despite cultural, linguistic, geographical or other peculiarities. The local expression of faith and practices in liturgy cannot detract from the core actions any more than Air Force standardized operating instructions do not vary. This is evinced in more than 20 different rites/churches with their variant practices (Donovan).

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¹ Table 1 Supervisor/Subordinate Breakdown

Supervisor	E6	E6	E5
Subordinates	E5	E2 & E3	Two E2s

² Table 2 US Air Force Enlisted Demographics as of July 2003

Highest Ed Level	Total	Percent	Highest Ed Level	Total	Percent
Unknown	10109	3.257%	3-4Yr (90+ SH)	2630	0.847%
No HS(Ex HS Senior)	203	0.065%	BA/BS	12886	4.152%
GED	187	0.060%	MA/MS	1887	0.006%
HS Diploma/Certificate	30722	9.899%	PhD	12	0.004%
1-3YR (15-89 SH)	210535	67.835%	Professional Deg	5	0.002%
Assoc Degree	41189	13.271%	Total	310365	100.000%