

Research Proposal:

Are non-white or female Officer Trainees (OTs) recycled or dropped from OTS
at higher rates than white or male OTs?

Standing out at Military Basic Training Equals Doom

In a training environment like Air Force Officer Training School (OTS), on Day Zero the trainers' first focus is on those individuals who stand out because they either clearly have prior military experience ("prior-Es" or non-priors), or they look different than the others with whom they are standing. Prior-Es will typically be looked upon favorably and receive less disciplinary action at OTS, as they are already experienced in military training and exhibit well-practiced cultural norms. Since 77.82% of Air Force officers are male, and 77.87% are white, individuals outside of the male-white demographic will look different than most at OTS (Air Force Personnel Center, 2020). This unfortunately may not bode well for female and/or non-white Officer Trainees (OTs), as similar research in the educational field has shown.

The Dangers of Implicit Bias at OTS

Military culture is masculine in nature, with juxtaposed femininity considered a threat to effectiveness (Davis, 2012) (Van Gilder, 2018). Non-white behaviors and communication styles are often misinterpreted by educators. For this research, this analogy extends to military trainers, practice of which leads to a cultural mismatch and an expectation for non-white and female students' underperformance (Staats, State of the Science Implicit Bias Review, 2013). Although the Air Force (AF) and Air University (AU) have recognized the concept of explicit bias, which is something that "can be consciously detected and reported," and is something OTS educators can be trained to avoid, *implicit bias* remains a threat to the equitable treatment for non-white

and female OTs (Amodio, 2010) (D. M. Amodio & Mendoza, 2010, p. 355). *Implicit biases* are cognitive process that occur outside of conscious awareness and influence social judgements, behaviors, and attitudes, which can present in prejudices and stereotyping (Gawronski, 2010). These implicit biases lead to the over-identification of non-white and female students for disciplinary action, which can lead to OTS program attrition or being “recycled” or forced to repeat the 8-week training program.

OTS Demographics

As of 1 January 2020, 82.93% of total officers were non-prior, 22.18% total officers were women, and 22.13% total officers were non-white. With these numbers, it is apparent that the females and non-whites will initially stand out at OTS. Standing out at basic military training, especially when associated with negative implicit bias, will hamper an OT's program success and completion. Trainers' negative focus is increased for non-whites and females at the start of OTS due to implicit bias. Military micro-cultural misconceptions of non-white and female underperformance contribute to a confirmation bias that the non-white or female OT is deficient among his/her peers (Van Wormer, 2010). The halo/horns effect also contributes negatively to an OT who is early-identified as deficient in one or more areas. For example, the horns effect would be the association of an OT who is poor at marching with perceived negative performance indicators in other areas, such as personal confidence or poor teamwork skills.

Groupthink at OTS

Additionally, there is little to no adjustment period granted to a non-prior military service OT before punishment is administered. This is most detrimental to non-prior OTs with cultural backgrounds different from the microcultural norm. Military basic training is about conforming to a group standard. Similar cultural background to the larger group will give an OT an initial

leg-up on a peer because that OT can more quickly identify the response or course of action that an Military Training Instructor, Flight Commander, or peer expects of them. Performing expected actions and providing expected responses allows an OT to avoid punishment, which is most essential during the beginning weeks of training to prevent future corrections for that specific OT. If an OT can avoid early correction and criticism, he/she is more likely to avoid later correction/discipline in the program. Confirmation bias from OTS Flight Commanders and peers also comes into play; an OT who started the program as a perceived low-performer has much more difficulty proving his/her confidence than a peer who was able to blend into the masses and not stand out or elicit criticism during the earlier weeks of training. Early identification of low-performers is a self-fulfilling confirmation bias process that robs the OT of the opportunity to adjust to both the military and the demands of OTS before the OT is determined by his/her superiors to be deficient, and unworthy of graduating with the cohort with which the OT began OTS. Rarely does an OT perform well in the beginning weeks of OTS and have a precipitous enough performance gap decline in the later weeks of OTS that lead to recycling or program attrition.

Research Proposal

This research proposal seeks to answer:

Are non-white or female Officer Trainees (OTs) recycled or dropped from OTS
at higher rates than non-minority OTs?

If a statistically significant difference is found, can AU researchers determine what the underlying reasons for these differences are? Are test scores or flight commanders' ratings different for white vs non-white or male vs female OTs?

Why We Care

On 19 June 2020, United States Secretary of Defense published a memorandum Actions for Improving Diversity and Inclusion in the Department of Defense which was a call to US military departments and Department of Defense (DoD) leaders to investigate the forces of bias and prejudice that have “direct and indirect impacts on the experiences of our minority members and their representation in our ranks, especially in our officer corps” (Esper, 2020). Air Force officers are commissioned through the AF Reserve Officer Training Corps (40.51%), United States Air Force Academy (22.37%), OTS (20.51%), through direct appointment (13.53%) (or other 2.97%) (Air Force Personnel Center, 2020). Organizational values and communications frameworks are first established in these programs for all members of the Air Force’s Officer Corps. An investigation into fair practices at OTS is line with United States Secretary of Defense Esper’s goal to embrace diversity and inclusion while rejecting hate and prejudice (Esper, 2020). These efforts could have a longer-term effect of attracting more non-whites and women to the Air Force officer corps, where they will be treated fairly, and will improve the integrity of Air University and the Officer Training program as all Officer Trainees will be afforded the same opportunities to succeed.

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