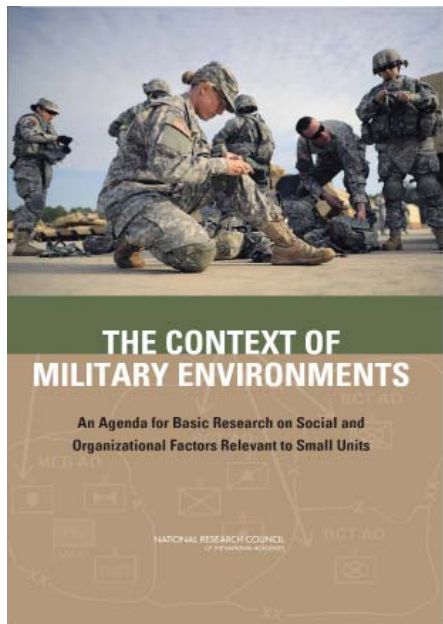


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## The Context of Military Environments: An Agenda for Basic Research on Social and Organizational Factors Relevant to Small Units



The U.S. Army engages in a broad range of missions that involve a diverse spectrum of environments. In addition to combat and counterinsurgency operations, missions include negotiation, reconstruction, and stability operations. Central to the success of Army missions is the functioning of the small units that carry out the tactical operations of strategic missions. Among the many factors that influence the functioning of small units are the social and organizational factors of the contexts in which the unit operates. There is the context of the small unit itself (the team, squad, or platoon level), as well as the context of the battalion or other larger Army unit within which small units operate. Furthermore, the unit's physical location and environment can vary greatly. Units may be stationed in combat or noncombat environments. They may be stationed on or off a military facility, inside or outside the United States, and soldiers may or may not be accompanied by family. Individual attributes of soldiers influence their behavior and therefore the performance of their small units, and these attributes

are consequently important for mission success (see the National Research Council's earlier report on this topic, *Human Behavior in Military Contexts*). However, it is also important to understand the role social and organizational factors play in influencing the behaviors of individuals and the performance of small units.

The U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences (ARI) asked the National Research Council to convene a committee to recommend a program of basic research related to social and organizational factors in order to improve understanding of how they affect soldiers and to maximize the effectiveness of U.S. Army personnel policies and practices. The committee's conclusions and recommendations are detailed in its report, *The Context of Military Environments: An Agenda for Basic Research on Social and Organizational Factors Relevant to Small Units*.

### THREE KEY POINTS

Based on a review of relevant literature and information gathered from Army personnel and

other sources, the committee arrived at three key points to assist ARI in developing its future basic research agenda:

- **Foster basic research conducted within Army environments.** ARI should take a leading role in making data on actual soldiers and small units available to researchers internal and external to the Army, and it should facilitate researchers' ability to gather data from soldiers in real Army contexts.
- **Develop unit level measurements of social and organizational factors.** ARI should develop basic research programs on the recommended topics that include unit-level measurements of social and organizational factors. Such measurements would enable, for example, the assignment of meaningful scores to a small unit to summarize the effectiveness of the unit's understanding of leaders' intent and leaders' understanding of a unit's readiness and motivation.
- **Create a longitudinal database.** ARI should take an active role in creating a longitudinal database to retain and maintain administrative and survey data that enable the tracking of both individual soldiers and small units over time.

### CRITICAL AREAS FOR UNDERSTANDING THE INFLUENCE OF SOCIAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL FACTORS

During this study, several key social and organizational factors emerged as particularly important for the success of small units. To develop fundamental knowledge in these critical areas, the committee recommends that ARI and other relevant U.S. military funding agencies support basic research that addresses norms, environmental transitions, contextual leadership, power and status hierarchies, and multiteam systems.

#### NORMS

Norms are group-level phenomena that influence the social context within small units, guiding behavior as well as perceptions about the behavior of self and others. The development and evolution of norms play a particularly important role at

### Future programs of basic research must unify theory and research from academic and laboratory environments with research conducted on real soldiers in actual military environments.

the small unit level, as group bonding occurs or fails within small units. Norms can foster the positive functioning of a unit, but norm-related problems, such as misalignment between Army values and a unit's social norms, can also occur. A scientifically informed understanding of the role

of social norms in individual and group behavior, and the processes through which norms form and change, will enable the Army to develop programs and processes to facilitate the development of positive norms and to address norm-based conflicts. Research on norms and how they operate in military environments can address a broad range of questions, such as what influences individuals'

adherence to sanctioned institutional norms, how norms become misaligned from Army values, and which social norms most correlate with small unit success.

#### ENVIRONMENTAL TRANSITIONS

A soldier's life is punctuated with environmental transitions, and in the 21st century, U.S. service members experience these transitions on a scale unprecedented in other aspects of life. Moving to a different city or beginning a different job can be disorienting and undermine performance and health. In other circumstances, transitions may provide opportunities to instill soldiers with new habits conducive to resilience and operational effectiveness. Attending to the impact of transitions will allow the Army to assess a variety of questions, such as whether there are ways to develop certain habits during training that facilitate more seamless transitions between environments or how to deactivate certain habits that are no longer functional in a new environment.

#### CONTEXTUAL LEADERSHIP

Leaders play a critical role in shaping and influencing the social context of small units, which in turn shapes individual behavior and unit performance. Research is needed on the knowledge and skills leaders require to understand and address social interactions within a unit; on the types of interactions that exert the strongest influence, positive or negative, on

unit performance under differing environmental conditions; and on how leaders can influence social interactions so as to have the most positive impact on unit performance. Such research will position the Army to develop leaders with strong contextual leadership skills, effectively interpreting, assessing, and molding the social interactions within the unit to influence the desired social context, capitalize on opportunities as they evolve, and ultimately enhance unit functioning.

## **POWER AND STATUS HIERARCHIES**

Military organizations are distinctive in the visibility and rigidity of their formal power hierarchies and chain of command. Military ranks define an explicit, consistent, complete ordering of formal authority within a power hierarchy. But, as in every organization, there are also important informal and less explicit sources of respect, esteem, and social influence that determine an individual's placement on the status hierarchy. Informal processes of negotiating status are an important source of influence in small units in addition to formal power. While the two hierarchies are not entirely independent, the extent of their alignment can vary among small units, with implications for performance and mission success. The unique nature of the military's rank structure requires research within military environments to understand soldiers' attainment of social influence and authority through informal sources of status within the context of the Army's formal power hierarchy. Questions that might be examined through such research include how socially shared concepts of the ideal or typical soldier originate and how such beliefs change.

## **MULTITEAM SYSTEMS**

Army small units do not operate in isolation; each one is an element in a larger multiteam system (MTS) that includes multiple distinct and interdependent teams. The MTS constitutes an important source of context for the behavior of small units and the individuals within them. MTSs can consist solely of units within the Army, or they can connect Army units with groups from other organizations to accomplish objectives requiring coordination with other services (e.g., joint forces), other nations (e.g., international task forces), or nonmilitary entities (e.g., provincial reconstruction teams). Units may be a part of more than one MTS at a time. Many factors such as the composition

of component teams, the expected duration of the MTS and the fluidity of its membership, and properties such as cohesion, trust, and efficacy at both within-team and between-team levels impact the success of an MTS. Research on MTSs is needed to advance understanding of topics such as the underlying generative mechanisms that explain how properties come about in these systems, the consequences of different degrees and patterns of properties in them, and possible interventions to shape or reshape properties that bear on individual and team behavior in order to maximize MTS functioning.

## **LONGITUDINAL SURVEY DATA**

Large amounts of administrative and survey data are currently collected by various entities within the Department of Defense, but the data are not retained or maintained in a way that enables long-term research programs to answer questions about how social and organizational factors affect the behavior of individuals and small units. Therefore, the committee advocates the creation of a longitudinal database to capture as wide a range of administrative and survey data as possible, to include, for example, responses from surveys given across the armed services, results of initial recruit testing, individual demographics and biodata, duty rotations, assignments, positions, and performance evaluations. It should also facilitate unit-level research by correlating individual and unit-level data. Specifically, the committee calls for active efforts to promote combined sets of data, such as those collected by the Millennium Cohort Study, Global Assessment Tool (through the Army's Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness Program), and other administrative records collected by the Department of Defense. Establishing a central repository for data collected from a probability sample of all recruits would facilitate combining sets of data to provide a record of career paths and achievements for recruits from all backgrounds.

In addition, a new longitudinal survey eliciting individual responses should be conducted periodically over the course of each soldier's career (including time both in and out of the armed forces) to obtain more detailed information about beliefs, attitudes, and experiences. The specific questions to be surveyed would be determined by a working group of ARI staff and other relevant experts in survey research and empirical social science. The

committee stresses the unique opportunity the Army has to answer basic behavioral and social science research questions on who advances and why—given the special characteristics of Army careers, such as promotion from within the ranks and large numbers of well-defined, comparable personnel positions.

### EFFECTIVE RESEARCH FUNDING STRATEGIES

The basic research program proposed in this report is intended to advance understanding of fundamental behavioral phenomena. It is designed to be innovative, and it requires consequential changes from current ARI policies and practices. It is intensely focused on understanding the behavior of real soldiers in real military environments. To fully implement such a research agenda would require a full financial analysis to develop detailed cost estimates of the proposed research agenda and to assess the necessary funds against ARI's current funding levels or projects – a task outside the scope of this committee.

However, the committee estimates that effective implementation of the proposed research agenda without decrement to existing programs of research would require an increase in the ARI budget to levels of “double digit” millions of dollars per year. The committee also offers effective research funding strategies to assist ARI in developing a future research agenda within funding limitations that may preclude resourcing the entire recommended agenda. ARI should allocate funds to develop high quality programs (with high impact potential for the Army) in small numbers to achieve sufficient depth in the selected research topics. Furthermore, ARI should choose one or more of the initiatives and fund several complementary projects within each chosen initiative that are likely to reinforce one another and result in a substantial contribution over a multiple-year commitment.

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**For More Information . . .** This brief was prepared by the Board on Behavioral, Cognitive, and Sensory Sciences (BBCSS) based on the report *The Context of Military Environments: An Agenda for Basic Research on Social and Organizational Factors Relevant to Small Units*. The study was sponsored by the U.S. Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences (ARI). Any opinions, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this publication are those of the authors and do not reflect those of ARI. Copies of the report are available from the National Academies Press, (800) 624-6242; <http://www.nap.edu> or via the BBCSS web page at <http://www.nationalacademies.org/bbcss>.

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