Features of Organizational Culture, Organizational Climate, and Leadership that Influence Ethical Behavior and Trust in the Army

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Introduction

The cultures and climates of organizations and institutions in the United States do not always promote ethical and moral behavior. The increasing number of misconduct scandals and negligent oversight occurring in these organizations is indicative of a problem in ethics. These incidents have decreased the general public's trust in our country's organizations and institutions (Lucas and Hanges, 2015, pg. 2).

Leadership is a key component in providing an understanding into why these cultures and climates allow for unethical and immoral behavior to persist. Leaders shape organizational climates and cultures. Aside from the formal polices, practices, and procedures, leaders influence these climates and cultures by presiding over them with their personal beliefs, the messages they teach and show, and the behaviors and actions they commit within and outside the organization. In turn, the resulting organizational climates and cultures help shape individuals' behavior.

The United States Army is a good organization in which to study ethical leadership because many incidents of unethical behavior such as sexual assault and harassment have been reported despite the many formal methods put in place to prevent this (Lucas and Hanges, 2015, pg. 2). A recent Pentagon investigation even indicated that many military cultures promote abusive leaders (Lucas and Hanges, 2015, pg. 7).

Historically, when ethical issues arise, more focus has been placed on the behavior that occurred rather than failures in leadership that allowed for these things to happen. A small scale, qualitative study was conducted to explore which features of organizational climate, culture, and leadership allow ethical and unethical behavior to occur in the Army, produce a shift in trust in leaders, and influence the likelihood to report unethical behavior.
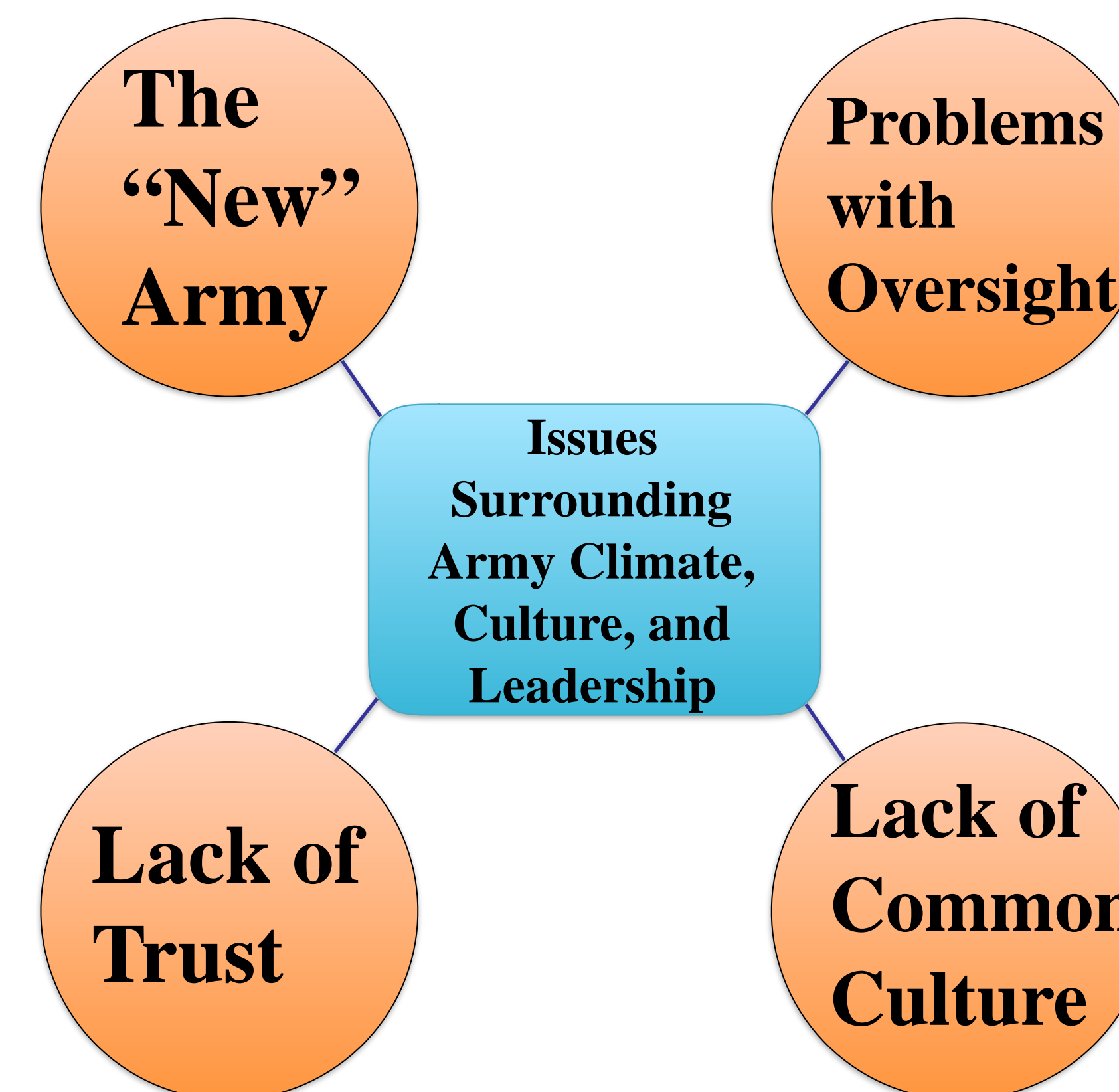
Methods

Participants: (N=3) Enlisted active duty personnel of the United States Army at the Ft. Carson Army Base in Colorado Springs, Colorado were the participants. Participant age, race, gender, and experience level varied; one Middle Eastern male, one Black female, and one White male.

Procedures: I conducted three separate interviews with three different Army personnel, as well as sat in and observed one interview conducted by Dr. Jeff Lucas. I finally corresponded in group discussion with the other researchers on the team about their interview findings.

Qualitative Data Collection: The interviews conducted were 45 minutes - 1 hour long. The interview questions focused on the participants' perceptions of the ethics, values, morals, climate, culture, and leadership in the Army.

Analysis: Interview recordings were replayed and analyzed and common terms and themes were highlighted. Discussions with the other research team members who also conducted interviews were completed to establish general trends and reoccurring themes.

Ft. Carson, Colorado Springs, CO

Themes

The "New" Army

Problems with Oversight

Issues Surrounding Army Climate, Culture, and Leadership

Lack of Trust

Lack of Common Culture

Quotes

• **The "New" Army versus the "Old" Army**
"Too many young people are in the Army…in the Army, these young people, they don't have the real meaning on what it is to respect another person or their opinions or the way they live their life…nobody cares…honestly a lot of young people, they don't care, they don't feel respect for you"

• **Problems with Oversight**
"When I grew up in the Army, it was 'you were two minutes late to work, alright go get your full gear and I'm going to make you do exercises for an hour and a half in the hot and humid sun', whereas today its now more of a gentle petting 'hey don't worry we'll go ahead and take care of you', instead of being the hard disciplined Army that we need to be…now its more of a buddy-buddy type of thing and I think it honestly degrades the effectiveness of the Army"

• **Lack of Trust up and down the Chain of Command**
"I don't trust any of my leaders, honestly…when I first got here, I had some financial issues, like I wasn't getting paid right, so I told my NCO, he was an E5, I told him what was going on…but instead of him helping me, he told everybody…that made me mad because I don't like people in my business…so of course after that I didn't trust him at all."

• **Lack of Common Culture within the Army**
"There's definitely cliques here, I think the cliques are more with the NCOs—with the higher ups—and if you're not in that clique of NCOs, they definitely treat the other NCOs differently…they hang out on the weekends, they do whatever, but if you're not in that clique they treat you totally different…they treat them like they're less, they treat them like they're not even NCOs, like they don't have the same rank, they don't respect them."

Results

Soldiers' perceptions:

• **The "New" Army**
  • Values duty first and family last
  • New generation is lacking respect
  • New politically correct climate
• **Problems with oversight**
  • Inconsistent oversight
  • Rule briefings/trainings are too formal and repetitive
• **Variability of trust up and down the chain of command**
  • Mistreatment of soldiers by leaders
  • Fear of gossip when reporting to a leader
  • Preferential treatment for leaders who commit unethical behavior (less severe punishments)
• **Lack of common culture**
  • New politically correct climate within a diverse space
  • Generational shift: more individualistic
  • Too "duty" or work oriented climate

Conclusion

In this small scale study, we found perceptions of a shift in Army values from family focused to duty focused, an emerging politically correct environment, and a generational shift that values individualism over team work. This breaks the traditional common culture of the Army, allowing smaller groups to emerge that can police themselves and more easily and willingly cover up incidences of misconduct. Based on the interviews conducted, the general theme was that with the new politically correct Army climate, the main goal is to appear proactive on limiting unethical conduct through formal means, while there appear to be inconsistencies on whether this follows in practice as well as it does in theory. Limitations of this study are its small sample size.

References

Lucas, Jeff, and Paul Hanges (2015). "Organizational Culture, Ethical Leadership, and Trust." Center for Research on Military Organization Department of Sociology, University of Maryland. Proposal Submitted to Army Research Institute for the Behavioral and Social Sciences in Response to BAA W911NF-13-R-0001 under BAA Topic II-A-1: Basic Research—Understanding Organizational Culture.

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