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“How Can She Claim Equal Rights When She Doesn’t Have to Do as Many Push-Ups as I Do?”

The Framing of Men’s Opposition to Women’s Equality in the Military

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The public arguments for and against women in the military and in combat are numerous, well-worn, and readily accessible in congressional testimony, books, and articles. But the laundry list of arguments does not necessarily tell us much about how military men actually make sense to themselves of their own experiences and opinions, or the ways that they frame their feelings about the issue. Drawing on in-depth interviews with military officers, this article describes and analyzes a dominant form in which male officers frame their opposition to women in the military, the “PT (physical training) protest,” a variant of “standards discourse.” Having different physical training standards for men and women is seen as special treatment for women, lowering standards for women, and/or evidence that women cannot cut it in the military. Although standards discourse invokes an apparently “objective” and neutral ideology that links equal status with same standards, the author shows that the discursive context in which male officers utter the PT protest reveals strong feelings of loss and anger about changes in the way the organization is gendered.

Key words: gender, military, physical training, sex differences, gendered organizations, standards, difference dilemma

“How can she claim equal rights when she doesn’t have to do as many push-ups as I do?” “How can she claim to be my equal when she can’t run as fast?” For anyone who spends time around male U.S. military personnel, complaints such as these are painfully familiar.¹ Although some women (and men) just brush it off as sour grapes, others see gender-normed physical training (PT) standards as a fundamental barrier to men’s acceptance of women in

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the military. If having different PT standards for men and women is seen as special treatment for women, lowering standards for women, and/or evidence that "women can't cut it" in the military, changing to uniform PT standards is seen as a remedy that could clear up lingering doubts about gender integration and reduce hostility toward women. But would it?

In this article, I use interviews with U.S. military officers to explore the meaning of what I have come to think of as the "PT protest" and "standards discourse" more generally. In the process, I highlight and critically examine some of the issues raised by the linking of equal status with same fitness standards. Drawing from those interviews, as well as sociological analysis of gendered organizations, I suggest that the debate over physical training standards reveals some deeper, more fundamental issues about gender integration, and that adopting uniform PT standards for men and women would leave those issues largely untouched.²

In the past decade, gender relations in the U.S. military have frequently been the focus of public attention. A long list of sexual harassment and assault scandals has brought media outrage and government scrutiny. Military women's participation in the Gulf War brought a deluge of news stories about "Mommies going off to war," even while women's performance in the war became the grounds for a renewed push to repeal the military's combat exclusion laws. Debates about women's expanding roles in the military and whether women should be in combat continue, both inside and outside the military. The public arguments are numerous, well-worn, and readily accessible in congressional testimony, books, and articles;³ they have even made their way into popular films (Tuten 1982; Segal 1982; Segal and Hansen 1992; Devilbiss 1990). But the laundry list of arguments does not necessarily tell us much about how military men actually make sense to themselves of their own experiences and opinions, or the ways that they frame their feelings about the issue. It seems to me that understanding more about their ways of constructing their opposition to and support of women in the military is crucial to knowing how to address some of the thornier issues of gender integration.

In 1998 and 1999, I conducted more than eighty in-depth interviews to try to do just that. The interviews were with male and female military personnel, white and black, ranging from cadets in military service academies up through senior officers in war colleges.⁴ Most were officers in the Army and Air Force, with just a few Navy and Marines. Among the men I interviewed, I found a fairly wide range in their degree of enthusiasm for gender integration, from those quite supportive of women's inclusion, to those quite opposed. The vast majority were ambivalent, accepting as reality that women are in the military to stay, but with differing degrees of reservation, and some variety in their articulated reasons for that reservation. I heard the PT protest more frequently from Army officers than Air Force officers, who raised the issue of "standards" in a variety of other forms—which is not surprising, given the

Army's greater emphasis on physical training. I also heard arguments framed in terms of standards far more frequently by white male officers than by black officers, whose own experiences often did not leave them sanguine about the application of standards. In fact, white male officers often pointed to the "successful integration of racial minorities" to support their claim that if you just meet the same standards, you will be treated equally. When I repeated this assertion to black officers it was met with reactions ranging from skeptical amusement to incredulity.

In the interviews, I asked each man to tell me about the "pluses and minuses" of gender integration. This article starts by briefly describing the answers I most often heard when I first asked the question and then moves to a discussion of a response that usually came further into the interviews—the PT protest. I draw on multiple interviews to argue that the PT protest is about far more than gender-normed fitness standards; it functions as a socially and institutionally acceptable way of expressing a variety of negative feelings about women in the military—feelings that are no longer as acceptable to state directly. I next examine one interview in depth, to explore the layers of meanings that are encoded in the protests about PT standards and standards discourse more generally. Finally, I explore what it means to talk about the military as a "gendered organization," and I show how that concept illuminates the path through which ability in a single physical task, such as running speed, can get equated with a female officer's leadership potential and how it shapes perceptions of women's performance more generally.

THE DOMINANT DISCOURSE AND THE OFFICIAL LINE

My interviews often had the feel of an archaeological expedition: first you explore the surface layer, then you dig deeper and explore the next layer, and then you dig deeper and explore the layer below that. There were many reasons for this multilayered quality. In any interview, what people say is in part shaped by the context, including their assumptions about whom the interviewer is, as well as the ways the interviewer reacts to what they say. In military culture, my being not only a civilian white woman, but also a college professor interested in gender integration issues, marked me as most likely to be a "liberal feminist"—and thus worthy of considerable initial suspicion.

In addition, the military is a highly political and hierarchical institution. There are explicit prohibitions—things that you cannot say, ways you are not allowed to speak to someone of a different rank, and so on—and implicit ones—ways of speaking in which you ought not indulge if you wish to get ahead. But even more pervasively, there is also a dominant discourse: an institutionally produced set of ways of talking and thinking about things, a set of readily available formulations, categories, positions, and ideas, through

which you learn to make sense of and speak about your experience.⁵ It includes, but is in no way limited to, what many of the officers referred to as *the official line*: statements that reflect official military policy rather than an individual's own thoughts or opinions. The official line, of course, easily becomes the default answer to be given to outsiders who come around asking questions. Although I began each meeting with a discussion of the measures I would take to protect the anonymity of my sources,⁶ and asked each officer to sign a consent form with the standard disclaimer indicating that the views expressed are those of the individual rather than those of his or her institution, branch of service, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. government, there was no guarantee that I would be told anything other than the official line.

Indeed, in many of the interviews with white male officers, my initial queries about the pluses and minuses of gender integration in the military elicited, on the whole, pretty standard answers, almost uniform from one man to the next. Regarding the pluses, I was repeatedly told that with the All-Volunteer Force (AVF), the military needs women to keep up the quality and quantity of new recruits.⁷ The other very common answer was an unadorned "diversity is good," without any reasons given, or examples offered. After hearing it several times, I was struck by a curious quality I often heard in the tone of voice. It was not a lack of conviction, for some said it with great force. Instead, I had the feeling of a kind of blankness behind the phrase. So I started to ask for examples. Most often, my query was met with a long silence as the officer searched his memory, and then a single, very specific answer related to the politics of a deployment, such as, "Well, it was really helpful to have women with us when we had to body-search women in Bosnia."⁸ Occasionally, a senior officer would assert the value of a stereotypically gender-linked trait, such as the Air Force general who enthusiastically told me that he liked having women under his command because they are more patient and attentive to detail,⁹ or the Army major who told me that women are better organized.¹⁰ (These answers were in sharp contrast to those given by women officers when I asked the same question; some of them went on at length about the different strengths that women can bring to military leadership, and the ways in which those qualities are central to strengthening the military.¹¹)

Similarly, when I asked about the minus side, I repeatedly heard a standard series of answers—although I had the sense of more feeling behind some of them. Typically I heard three responses. One, articulated with the lowest intensity, framed objections to women in combat not by pointing to women's presumed physical and emotional capabilities (or lack thereof),¹² but by pointing to public opinion. The claim was that the American people just are not prepared for female casualties and are not ready to have women prisoners of war or women coming home in body bags.¹³ Female casualties (or fear of them) would make leaders worried about lack of public support for military actions; thus, it could prevent deployments or cut them too short too soon.

"Can you imagine if it were a woman pilot's naked body being dragged through the streets? We'd be out of there."¹⁴

Second, there was a financial argument, typified by one Air Force officer's explanation of his concern about military women being bad investments: "Look, say the cost of training a pilot in the Air Force is one million for general flight training, and another half million for a specific plane. And then the woman leaves because she wants to have a family, or, she takes a maternity leave to have a baby, and when she comes back, she's gotta be retrained all over again, she needs another half million in retraining. That baby costs you, the taxpayer, half a million dollars more."¹⁵

The third minus, most common of all (even among many men who count themselves supporters of women in the military) and typically expressed with greater intensity, is some variation on the theme that gender integration degrades military effectiveness and unit cohesion. One cluster of reasons centers on sexuality; once women are present, sexual tensions and sexual relationships are seen as inevitable. The other centers on women's reproductive functions; pregnancy, child care, menstruation, and "female problems" are all seen to cause obstacles to effective military functioning.¹⁶

All of these answers to my query about the pluses and minuses of gender integration tended to come easily and fast, early in an interview. The pluses clearly echo the official line. The minuses, even if they do not reflect an official position transmitted through the military hierarchy, do reflect a set of concerns that is acceptable to voice publicly within the military—not necessarily the official line but not something you will get in trouble for saying out loud in the wrong place (differing from overt misogyny or sexual harassment). In fact, during my participant observation, I heard commanding officers raising many of these issues with their subordinates, thus clearly communicating the message that these are reasonable concerns, permissible to raise. These ways of framing and articulating reactions to gender integration can, then, be thought of as part of the dominant discourse.

THE PT PUZZLE

That first layer of negatives raised by male officers (e.g., public opinion, expense, and sexuality/reproduction) could all be considered to fall into the category of practical or functional problems with gender integration, problems that could trouble military leaders who need to find ways to cope with the consequences. Although the problems are seen as being the products of women's presence, they are usually framed in terms of difficulties for the military, rather than anger or resentment overtly directed at women themselves. (The one notable exception to that is anger at women who are believed to be getting pregnant to avoid a training exercise or deployment.¹⁷) Women officers, when I asked them about these same issues, responded in a variety of

ways—discounting the validity of some, offering policy solutions to some, and shaking their heads and saying “look, that’s just bad leadership” to others. But my point, for the moment, is that whether or not these need to be issues, each of those “first-layer” responses can be seen as concerns that could understandably arise when responsible military officers think about gender integration and military effectiveness.

In contrast, further into the interviews, an issue kept appearing that had no discernible relationship to military effectiveness. It was an issue raised by everyone from male cadets to male generals, with a lot of heat. I found men’s negative feelings about women in the military most frequently framed in terms of the perceived injustice of gender-norming the physical fitness and training standards—the PT protest. “They say they want equal rights— well then, they should be held to the same fitness standards we are,” or, “how can they expect equal rights, if they aren’t able to do the exact same things we can” (run as fast, do as many push-ups, etc.)?

Military men’s indignation about gender-normed PT standards has captured the attention of military women, civilian legislators, and civilian commentators alike. Military women and their advocates advance a range of arguments in response. Some point out that the PT protest might make sense if there were a clear link between men’s current fitness standards and specific job requirements—but there is not. There are no clear relationships between specific military physical training standards and the actual physical requirements of the tasks people will perform. In fact, PT standards are meant to be measures of overall physical fitness, health, and well-being, not the ability to accomplish particular tasks.¹⁸ Others point out that even as a measure of fitness, the current tests are arbitrary and biased toward male capabilities: many fitness experts agree, for example, that flexibility is a crucial part of overall fitness, but this element of fitness, one in which women tend to score higher than men, is not included in the tests.

Other advocates for military women point out that PT standards are not only gender-normed, but also age-normed, yet age-norming generates little ill feeling. Some emphasize the recent and arbitrary character of the current standards, pointing out that they are so different from (and so much more stringent than) those the military had twenty years ago. Many endorse “equal level of effort for both genders,” rather than same outcome, as the appropriate measure of fitness.¹⁹ And some question whether women’s effective participation in the military requires that they have the exact same strengths and weaknesses as men.²⁰

Women senior officers with whom I have talked have also come up with a range of practical responses to men’s feelings about the issue. One approach, taken by more than half of the women I interviewed, is to say some version of, “If in order to be respected, we need to meet the same standards, I will always pass the PT tests at the same level as my troops—despite the age- and gender-norming that would allow me to do differently.” Some military women also

agree that both sexes should have the same PT standards, as long as they are relevant ones (e.g., MOS [military occupational specialty], or task, or AIT [advanced individual training] specific standards). Others point out, however, that setting such task- or job-specific standards would itself be a nightmare, with the process likely to be subjective, arbitrary, and exclusionary. "Ask someone currently doing a job what characteristics it takes to be able to do it, and he'll end up describing someone exactly like himself."²¹

All of these responses by advocates for women in the military, as well as the responses by policy makers who advocate simply having uniform standards, have one thing in common. They all treat statements such as "how can they demand equality when they don't meet the same fitness standards?" as straightforward, transparent, rational statements amenable to rational argument. In other words, they deal with the PT protest as being about exactly what the overt, surface content is—in this case, a lack of understanding how gender-specific physical standards can be justified, or the belief that they cannot be.

My interviews, however, have left me questioning whether addressing the overt content, meeting the complaint with rational argument, is enough. Over and over male officers told me that they did not think gender integration problems would be solved until there was a uniform fitness standard, but I have come to wonder how much of a difference it would make. Would having uniform fitness standards actually dispel a lot of the hostility, resentment, and sense of unfairness that some military men feel about gender integration? To answer this question, I think we need to dig deeper onto the meaning of the PT protest. Why is it such a frequently heard protest? Why is it uttered with such an intense sense of grievance? What meanings does it carry?

THE MULTIPLE MEANINGS OF THE PT PROTEST

Given the prevalence of the protest that women do not deserve equal rights if they have different PT standards, the intensity of emotion with which it was almost always stated, and the fact that it arises later into an interview, after the more acceptable responses have been exhausted, how might we understand the PT protest?

Within the context of the interviews, comments overtly about gender-normed physical fitness standards seemed to function in a variety of ways, depending on who was talking. For some men, the PT protest seemed to be a way of reasserting gender difference—of saying "you may be here thinking that you can do the same things we can, but really, we're the real men and you're not." One way this came out is in the many stories I heard from women officers about "maxing" their PT tests, when a male peer (often a friend) did not. Immediately afterward, when she was feeling all proud and happy, he would come over with the jocular but sneering response that it did not really

mean much because the bar was not set very high for women. Not only does the remark belittle her accomplishment, it changes PT tests from a shared challenge and a bonding experience into a site for the assertion of difference.

For some men, protests about gender-normed PT also seemed to be a socially acceptable, slightly oblique way of asserting what is no longer officially sayable—that women are inferior. Throughout the military, women are proving themselves as competent as men in a wide range of jobs and skills, belying the claim that women cannot do the job as well. The one irreducible difference for the majority of women is that as a group, most women have less upper body strength and do not run as fast as men as a group; although, of course, some women will be stronger and faster than some men, and the differences in physical capacity within either group are much greater than the differences between the groups. Whether the physical performance differences between men as a group and women as a group are meaningful, whether the difference is significant or not in 99% of military MOSs, whether women are strong and fast enough to do their jobs, whether running a mile a minute faster enables a man “to outrun a bullet faster than a woman can,”²² whether some men cannot perform some of those same tasks that most women cannot, whether this difference could be made irrelevant by either having uniform task-related standards, or re-engineering tasks—all of those rational questions are in this instance quite beside the point. This difference, in men’s and women’s PT performance, is the one salient gender difference in performance, where women “fail to come up to the male standard”; as such, it provides a focal symbol for pointing to (what some men construe as) female inferiority. Talking about different PT standards becomes a way of asserting that pretensions of gender equality are false. It is a way of saying, “they’re not just different. They’re not as strong, not as fast, not as good. What I can do is the real standard, and they just can’t cut it. They pretend to be my equal, but they’re not.”

A third related function of the PT protest is that it acts for some men as a socially acceptable way of expressing anger about women’s expanding role in the military. Over and over, when I heard these comments, the tone of voice was not only angry—there was also a resentful challenge in it. The PT protest became a shorthand for, “Well, they want equal rights, they want equal access to competing for my job? Let’s see them prove they deserve it!” And again, since upper body strength and running speed are areas where most women will not be as strong as most men, they become the standard for proving it. You do not hear, “How can they ask for equal rights when they can’t fly, or drive a tank, or lead, or do the job competently?” because women can. Recourse has to be to upper body strength. The ludicrousness of this is apparent in a remark Linda Bird Francke (1997) reports as coming from a “furious” male West Point cadet in 1992: “Man to man, woman to man, let’s see how many push-ups you can do and let that determine our promotions.” One has to

wonder about the proposed reliance on push-ups as the marker of military leadership potential.

Finally, and maybe most profoundly, the PT protest seemed to be a more generalized expression of white male embattlement. In other words, the issues discussed earlier that came out as the first layer of the "minuses" column—public opinion, cost, or possible degradation of combat effectiveness—might be seen as reflecting the challenges of a commander faced with the complexities of gender integration. But the PT protest is different in kind. It is more a personal *cris du coeur*—"it's no fair!! FIRST of all, you are competing with me, when you shouldn't be—after all, it's my organization—AND you are getting an unfair advantage!" In fact, I think the PT protest, and a whole genre of similar complaints about standards and special treatment, function for white men as a kind of shorthand, a symbolic code for anger about two intertwined issues: a nagging sense of injustice about the way they feel they are being treated compared to other groups, and often, anger about challenges to their sense of ownership, to their feeling that "This is my military, a man's military." In other words, the assertion that you might have heard openly stated ten years ago—this is my military, and you don't belong here—has migrated. It is not really acceptable in mixed company to say it that way anymore, but men can talk about standards. In the section that follows, I will analyze one interview in detail to show how this displacement operates.

LOWER STANDARDS, DOUBLE STANDARDS, AND SPECIAL TREATMENT, OR "DON'T YOU CHANGE MY MILITARY OR CHALLENGE MY PLACE IN IT?"

As I indicated above, one important element of the PT protest that makes it the gold standard protest is that it can appear to be about the requirements of the job, a question of whether women deserve an equal place if they cannot perform as well. Its power comes from the fact that there are real physical issues; it would be both irresponsible and dangerous to ignore the issue of physical capacity to do any of the tasks involved in a job, or soldiers' wish to know that members of their unit would be able to pull them out of danger if they were injured in combat. However, men's current PT standards do not ensure that all men can successfully accomplish those tasks,²³ so demanding that women meet them is not really to the point.

Instead of seeing the PT protest as being about a job or task performance issue, it needs to be understood as the most common and acceptable part of a larger category of (male) grievance that gets articulated in a discourse of standards. The dominant discourse of male complaint about women in the military focuses on lower standards, double standards, and special treatment, variations on the central theme that women "fail to meet the standard." It is crucial to note that while concern about how well standards are met might be

assumed to apply to all military standards, the particular standards highlighted in this discourse constitute a rather selective segment of the possible discussion. The presences and absences are revealing. Regarding *lower standards*, for example, the charge is most frequently made regarding physical fitness standards. It ignores a plethora of other standards that are equally, if not more, important to the military. Which standards are missing? A 1978 Department of Defense study is suggestive: "The average woman available to be recruited is smaller, weighs less, and is physically weaker than the vast majority of male recruits. She is also much brighter, better educated, scores much higher on the aptitude tests and is much less likely to become a disciplinary problem" ("Background Study" 1978). The latter are not the standards that the male standards discussion is about.

In this section, I will explore the standards issue and argue that it can only be understood in the context of thinking about men's responses to institutional change—and change in an institution that they identify as their own. Drawing on extended excerpts from an interview with a white male colonel, I will look at the interweaving of some of the meanings of the PT protest described above with broader issues of standards and fairness, and I will explore the underlying feeling that often unites them—male anger that their institution is no longer theirs. In this interview, Colonel Holmes kept coming back to the issue of standards, in many different layered forms, and I quote from it at length because I think of it as offering almost a kaleidoscopic refraction of the different forms in which the issue is framed.

Typically, the outcry against having different standards for men and women is couched as an issue of fairness—we should all perform equally to get equal rewards. Colonel Holmes starts with fairness, construed as everyone meeting the same standard: "There's a standard that's set, and if you meet it, OK."

Framed this way, the point might appear to be that fairness demands that women and men meet the same standard. However, if that is all that is meant, a logical solution might be to rethink the standards, based on a functional rationale, and then set one standard that everyone must meet; yet that never seems to be the point. In part, this is because there is tremendous resistance to having to change the institution to allow women to fit in (as I will address at greater length below). In part, it is because any change associated with gender integration is interpreted as a lowering of standards. Like many of the other men I interviewed, Colonel Holmes (who was not himself a service academy graduate) brought up the entry of women to the service academies and some of the subsequent changes in physical training that occurred: "Like they say that standards at the academies were drastically changed and really degraded when women first started in them."²⁶

But perhaps the most crucial part of why "fairness as both genders meeting the same standard" does not easily translate for him and others into creating new uniform standards is that *standards* is not used simply to refer to the literal meaning of the word: "a thing or quality or specification by which

something may be tested or measured" (*Oxford American Dictionary* 1980). Instead, it often refers to the pre-existing standards, which almost seem to be sacralized. Or at least, they appear almost to be reified—as though they were something outside of anyone's agency or ability to act on. A (pre-existing) standard is treated as though it is its *standardness*, the very fact that it is a standard, that compels that it should be met. There is no attempt to justify why that should be the standard. It is simply the prior existence of the standard that is important.

Even when standards have not been changed, and no female-specific standard has been added, Colonel Holmes believes that women are unfairly allowed to pass without meeting the standard, or with extra help, for political reasons—that in practice, the standards are *de facto* different, that there are informal double standards:

You hear stories—when women went into pilot training, people were told "They *will* get through pilot training." What if a man went in crying after he did a bad flight? It's different standards.

The Colonel's [promotion] Board that just met, women were promoted at highest rate of anyone. I look at that, there are colonels now, and I'm thinking—well, these are people who've been in the [his branch] twenty-something years. I kinda go—they weren't the highest rank the last year and the last year and the last year up to these positions. Now all of a sudden they're the highest percentage promoted? I'm not on the Board, but you kinda sense that someone said "make darn sure that we get some women. It better look good." Then, when I see you as a colonel in my group, I kinda go—well, someone made damn sure that you made colonel. They didn't make sure I made colonel, but they made darn sure you did. You start to build this wall up. And it's back to the standards—obviously, the standards are different. Cause all of a sudden 6% make it as a white male navigator, and 15% of the women in the [service branch] make it, and you kinda go, huh?

So, women should meet the same standards as men, but they should be the existing standards, not uniform new ones (i.e., lower standards). It is unfair to have different standards for men and women (i.e., double standards), but, when women (or African American males, as I heard in other interviews) succeed, they are obviously the beneficiaries of special treatment, rather than having the uniform standards applied to them in the same way as to everyone else. (An alternative interpretation of the facts, the possibility that more women are ranking higher this year because in previous years men were the beneficiaries of "special treatment" or women were discriminated against, does not appear to have occurred to him.)

But there also appears to be more going on in this colonel's talk of standards. Some of his comments suggest that beyond the problem of fairness, the issue of standards is linked to a more general anger about having things change. Uniform standards have been central to the military's social contract—shifting them is experienced as a betrayal. "You get in

under one standard, and then they go and change it! If you start moving that line so that other people fit in—it's a problem when the standards start changing." The implication is that you could let other people in as long as you do not change anything about the standards, but the anger about change is also evident.

Hold it—they're coming in to this organization, we're all equal, is what we say—and then we're changing the standards. Maybe they needed to be changed, who knows? But still, those were the rules, that everybody lived by until that one day when a female walked in that door.

Besides the reappearance of the reification of the rules, this statement is particularly interesting because in it he acknowledges the opposing argument, one that is frequently heard as part of the institutional discourse—that the changes needed to occur anyway, and they have made things better. But that official line is subordinated to his resentment that women's presence is what broke the social contract that everyone had signed onto, and his anger about the changing of the rules that everybody had lived by, and accepted living by, until women spoiled it.

Exactly who is responsible for these changes is a point on which he oscillates. In the excerpt above, he says *we* (the military) are changing the standards, but the last sentence suggests everyone was willing to live by the same rules except for women. When he returns to the issue of standards again later in the interview, he says that the decision to redesign women's flight suits is "not the women's fault" (the military made the decision), but the decision was made by the military in response to the women's "complaining," rather than "just wear[ing] 'em buddy," as any man would do, since "this is the military":

We were talking about the standards earlier. . . . There was an article in a magazine, saying women are to receive new design of flight-suits. And you read the article and they've interviewed women. And well yeah, they're baggy, the sleeves are too long. So I'm reading this article thinking, well, the flight-suit I wear, they all come in even numbers. I really need a 42 Short. You can have a 40 or a 42. A 40's really a hair short, the 42 is too long—no one ever said, "Poor Colonel Holmes, your flight-suit doesn't fit, we're going to redesign it." So but one day, I open the [magazine] and we're redoing it for the women. It's back to what I said about standards. The standards were good enough for a male in that flight-suit—you just wear 'em buddy, this is the military. But you get women in, and it's all of a sudden, we gotta redesign this thing. It's not women's fault. . . . But again that message goes out there at lightning speed—we told you you're all equal, however, we're gonna redesign the suit because they've complained about the sleeves being too short. And it bugs me.

I must admit that I was at first rather surprised by these comments. While the PT protest has a veneer of being relevant to military effectiveness, this grievance, in contrast, does not; in fact, it seems to be about something relatively insignificant. Really, what difference does it make to him? Of course,

uniform design is a fairly loaded topic for women in the military, for the design of women's uniforms has been a way in which gender difference has been both constructed and denied.²⁵ There also are, in fact, functional issues when putting women in men's uniforms when, for example, boots or sleeves that are too big make it difficult to perform tasks safely and efficiently.²⁶ But neither of those issues appears to be the point for Colonel Holmes. Instead, what galls him seems to be twofold. First, women appear to be getting something he did not, something which he actually wants—in this instance, a uniform that fits right. And second, even more to the point, there again seems to be an issue of an implied social contract that is broken. "You're all equal" in this instance seems to mean that you will all get treated the same way in spite of the ways that you are different; in the military, everyone's gotta put up with not having exceptions made for them, and being treated uniformly.

But that social contract—you'll be treated the same way—usually is experienced as important because there is a lot at stake. The military is supposed to be a hierarchical meritocracy, and same treatment under uniform standards is supposed to determine access to scarce resources—prime postings and promotions. In this context, what is especially interesting here is that we are getting further and further away from anything that might actually be seen as concrete or functionally important in the standards/fairness linking. That is, typically when the issue of uniform standards is raised, it is linked to the fairness of evaluation procedures. The idea is that the military social contract ensures that everyone has a fair and equal chance because they are all being judged by one set of standards. It was the supposed violation of that precept in failing to hold to uniform standards in pilot evaluations, and in the recent Colonel's Board, that Colonel Holmes was angry about. In contrast, in the flight suit example, men and women are being treated differently, but there is nothing obvious at stake. So why does it matter? Why does it rankle so?

I think the answer becomes apparent in his next comment:

It's like—I'm Boy Scouts. I was an Eagle Scout myself, my son is an Eagle Scout—I remember reading about women wanting to be in Boy Scouts. Well as soon as they get in, they wanna change this, this, and this. I go, this is the Boy Scouts. There's the Girl Scouts—if you wanna do this, go join the Girl Scouts. Why join my Boy Scouts and change my organization? . . . I look at the flight suit thing the same way—you joined a male organization, no doubt about it, that's no secret—and everything's gonna change now all of a sudden? It rubs people the wrong way.

And there is the crux of the matter for him and, I suspect, for many others. It is neither difference per se nor different treatment. It is not that having different standards for men and women is somehow in and of itself unfair. It is that the military is a male organization—an organization he identifies as *his* organization.²⁷ What to him is so unfair is changing that. He believes he should always be able to say that it is his organization, a male organization, and that

is the social contract which gender integration threatens to break. That is the shadowed heart of the standards grievance; men's outrage and grief about the loss of their place in *their* male military is what is condensed and ventriloquated in the talk of lowered and doubled standards.

Conversely, confrontation and direct articulation of those feelings is avoided and obscured by the formulation that the problem is different standards, and the implication that everything would be fine if standards were not changed for the women. Indeed, Colonel Holmes immediately turned away from the insights inherent in his Boy Scout analogy and concluded it with a sentence that returned to the issue of not changing standards and procedures: "If they would just let women come in and let the system work, it would have been smooth as silk." Yet, the assertion that it would be fine for women to join, as long as nothing were changed for them, did not seem to me to accord with his vehement expression of attachment to "my male organization" that immediately preceded it. When he paused, I asked, "So, do you think there wouldn't have been resentment if it had been done right?" And when asked that question directly, he thought for a moment, and then in his answer indicated that even if the standards issue was dealt with correctly, the "man's world" issue remained. "You woulda had some. It was a man's world. It's like when Albright became Secretary of State. She's entered a man's world, no doubt about it."

In other words, previously he had been saying that different standards was an issue because it was changing the prior, uniform standards of the man's military as it existed. But here, in response to my question, he indicated that even if they "let the system work" (i.e., kept it functioning exactly as it was, and, both literally and metaphorically, just let women fit into men's uniforms the best they could), there still would have been resentment simply because it was a man's world, and men would feel that women just did not belong. In that framing, the issue is not that women are changing his organization, but that they simply do not belong because it is a male organization.

This prompted me to finally ask directly, "Do you think women should be in the military?"

Colonel Holmes: Ten years ago I woulda said "no." I'm speaking about [his branch] now. What I see nowadays, I don't see a problem. Once we get over the standards that we talked about. . . . Like I said, in [his branch], there are some just as smart as we are, I don't see any difference there. They perform just as well . . .

C: Ten years ago, when you would have said no, what would your reasons have been?

Colonel Holmes: Just cause this is my male organization and what the heck are they doing, coming in?

What seems apparent, tracing his comments, is that while he would no longer say (even to himself) that women do not belong in the military, the feelings

that would have initially led him to say it ("this is my male organization and what the heck are they doing, coming in?") are still shaping his reactions to women in the military. But now, those feelings that women simply do not belong in his male organization have been transmuted into a different discourse, a more abstract, less personalized one, about standards and fairness—a discourse that obscures, probably both to the listener and the speaker, the feelings underneath it. Or, put another way, there is a more straightforward discourse in which he can, and used to, conceptualize and articulate his negative feelings, but it is no longer a viable option for him, for at least two reasons. First, at the institutional level, it is no longer acceptable. And second, he has seen the competent ways in which women perform the job, and so, at the level of his rational judgment, he can no longer conclude that women do not belong there.

At the end of the interview, I asked Colonel Holmes if there was anything else important that he thought I had missed. His answer revealed one more twist of the kaleidoscope of the meanings enfolded in and ventriloquated by the standards discourse. In these comments, there is a shift from expressing anger about women wanting to change his male organization, to an even more individual, personal anger—anger that women are competing for his (and other men's) jobs. And again, the way he frames it is as a matter of standards.

My son had to sign up for the draft when he turned 18, but women don't. There's another thing, that's just a rub. Again, you're asking us to treat women equal—you're just as smart, just as good—okay, come on, but let's get on with the show here . . . [sounding very angry]. I just looked at that and I said what a bunch of bull! They require my 18 year old male, but that female that wants MY job as a [his position], that female that wants to be the CEO of General Dynamics—she doesn't have to sign up! So again, we're back to the standards thing, and we've—boom—dropped that standard.

I responded to his point about the draft, saying that although I understood his point, I was not sure how to put it together with something he had said earlier in the interview. He had spoken with great passion about how wrong it is for women to work when they have young children, and how bad it is to put children in day care. Given those beliefs, I told him, I was not sure why he would want all women to be required to sign up for the draft and thus potentially be separated from their children. He responded:

Colonel Holmes: Well, you either gotta go all the way, or not at all.

C: How come?

Colonel Holmes: Because then you've developed a double standard. And I think that's where people have the problem with the women in the military, it's the double standard.

So, if women want to act like men and compete for male privilege, they should be treated just like men—to not do so is to create double standards.

That treating them just like men would also conflict with another deeply held value of his (i.e., women staying home with children) is not part of that calculus. The focus is an angry, almost punitive, "You want to do this? You want what's mine? Okay, but if you want to try to get it, you must play exactly by my rules and do everything a man would. And if you aren't prepared to do that, to go all the way, than you shouldn't be on my turf at all."

What is the emotional intensity, the anger that came through in this and many of the interviews all about? First, of course, we have to ask if there is, in fact, preferential treatment given to women in situations such as flight training and promotion boards. What is striking is that while I am unable to know the degree to which it may or may not have taken place, so are the men I interviewed. Not a single one of them told me of experiences they themselves had where they saw, firsthand, preferential treatment. Yet, almost every one of them told me about stories they had heard about something that someone else said had happened somewhere else to someone else at some other time. These stories circulate like paper currency, passed from hand to hand, without anyone ever seeing, or asking to see, the gold that backs it up (well, during the days of the gold standard, anyway). Nobody knows for sure there is something behind it, but they accept it, and pass it on. As in any other institution, the power of the stories comes not from their evidentiary value (even though they are often offered as evidence), but from their ability to condense and symbolize something that people believe and think important. Even granting that some of the stories may be based on events that really happened, they function as myth, constructing foundational meanings and suffusing the discourse. The telling of the story itself is far more widespread than the practices—but in the widespread telling, the practices themselves come to appear more widespread than they could possibly be. (If they were that widespread, the sheer number of incidents would mean that men would have been telling me examples from their own experience.)

Second, looking at Colonel Holmes's comments about women wanting his job, it might be tempting to say that this, at last, is what the anger is "really" about—that white men's opposition to women in the military is all about not wanting the competition, not wanting to give up their white male privilege. But, as a step-by-step analysis of this interview reveals, that is too simple a conclusion to draw. Yes, for this man and many others I interviewed, anger about competition from women, especially when they perceive the competition as taking place under unfair terms, is central to their hostility to women in the military. But their feelings are more complex and multifaceted than that.

We all have multiple ways of understanding and making sense of experience by drawing on different discourses available to us and appropriate to different contexts, and this interview exhibits a variety of frames in which the colonel names the reasons for his discomfort and anger. Each is meaningful, rather than simply a "cover" for "the truth" of resistance to giving up white

male privilege. The discourse of standards is a potent and meaningful one for the colonel and the other military men I interviewed because it is prominent in military culture and central to the ideological heart of the military social contract. As such, it is part of the institutional dominant discourse, so it is not only a resonantly meaningful one for men when they are framing their experience, but also a very acceptable way to frame and speak about gender and race issues.

But what the interview with Colonel Holmes reveals is that the standards discourse cannot be understood only on its own terms; its meaning is not to be found only in its surface content. It also stands in for, and ventriloquates, a series of feelings and meanings that are not acceptable for men to say directly in public or, sometimes, even to themselves. For some men, these include not only anger about having to compete with women, but also feelings of rage and loss about the ways their institution has changed (or, for younger men, the ways it is different from the image that they grew up with). Ultimately, it becomes a form for expressing meanings far beyond the overt discursive frame of standards, fairness, and rights.

CONCLUSION

In sum, I have been exploring a form in which I frequently heard white male officers frame what was, for them, an acute problem in military gender integration: gender-normed PT and the issue of "standards." Although my analysis is based on interviews with officers, data collected by the 1999 Congressional Commission on Military Training and Gender-Related Issues suggests that it may also be relevant to the ways male enlisted personnel frame their reactions to gender integration.²⁸

The discourse of standards appeals to abstract conceptions of fairness, equality, and same treatment that are part of the culture of the organization, as well as of the larger society. But, I have argued that standards discourse, the seemingly objective and neutral call for fairness, often functions as an institutionally acceptable form of expressing many otherwise not officially sayable negative feelings about women. It can be a means of constructing and reinforcing gender difference, a way of asserting male superiority, a form of expressing anger about competition from women, and rage and grief about the loss of the military as a male sanctum.

Returning at last then to the PT protest, all of this suggests that it is a mistake to think that equalizing PT standards is going to make men's antipathy toward women in the military, or their feelings of unfairness and injustice, go away. The feelings expressed by the PT protest are multifaceted and complex, and they are likely to continue to be felt as well as simply expressed in different forms if this symbolic focal point is removed.

NOTES

1. Apparently, they will be painfully familiar to those who spend time around firefighters and police officers as well, according to the feedback I got from women in those services when I presented this article at the Biennial Conference on Women in Uniform, Women's Research and Education Institute, Arlington, VA, 10 December 1998.

2. Representative Steve Buyer, (R-IN), Chair of the House Armed Services Committee's Subcommittee on Military Personnel has stated that if the armed forces do not standardize the PT standards for men and women, he will introduce legislation to make them do it (HASC Hearings, 17 March 1998). Personal communication, Lory Manning, 11 May 1999.

3. Two popular films which fictively rehearse many of the same debates are *GI Jane* and *Courage Under Fire*.

4. *Cadet* is the term used for officer trainees at both the U.S. Military Academy and the U.S. Air Force Academy.

5. My use of the term *discourse* is indebted to Michel Foucault's (1976) development of the concept of discourse.

6. While the military is a very big organization, it can also be a very small world, and citing particular interviews without compromising anonymity can be challenging, for several reasons. I asked interviewees to tell me how I might refer to them in the text without compromising their identities, but I found that I still could have a problem if I cited interview dates. As you ascend the rank structure, there get to be only a few people who would fit a particular description. Or, at a given base or institution, only one or a very few people would fit the most basic identifying description. In addition, as the inquiring female researcher, my presence was noted at various institutions where I did interviews, and, often, there remains a paper trail of whom I was scheduled to interview on which day. Because of all of this, and because many people were, indeed, extraordinarily generous in their self-revelation, I am only referring to people by service, rank, and gender, and I will usually not refer to the place where an episode happened. (If place is particularly relevant, there will be less of the other identifying information.) In endnotes, I specify the year but not the date since the date would not only reveal the specific place, but could also effectively make it possible to determine who the speaker was, should anyone care to do so. I also include the interviewee's code number. In the body of the text, I use pseudonyms.

7. Not only has this perception been there since the initiation of the All-Volunteer Force (AVF), but it was particularly salient to senior officers at the time I was doing the interviews. Although it was several months before the stories of recruiting shortfalls hit the front page of *The New York Times* ("Problem for Navy: Too Few Hands on Deck" 1999; "The Short-Handed Military: A Wisp of a Draft" 1999), within the military, the issue dominated the concerns of many.

8. Interview, male Army colonel, 1998. (2-3-18)

9. Interview, male Air Force general, 1999. (1-5-13)

10. Interview, male Army major, 1999. (2-4-17)

11. These include multiple women officers, from each of the services, who told me some variation on the theme that women tend to have leadership skills that rely less on berating and breaking people down and more on building individuals up and creating commitment and consensus. It also includes the Army general who told me that women would be better leaders on the battlefield because their decisions would not be distorted by "testosterone poisoning" (Personal communication, 1993).

12. This is, of course, a position taken by several prominent military writers, as well as by their civilian supporters. See, for example, Hackworth (1991) and Webb (1979). Brian Mitchell, a civilian journalist with some military experience, articulates similar views in *Weak Link: The Feminization of the American Military* (1989). Former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich's classic statement of the position is worth quoting in full:

If combat means living in a ditch, females have biological problems staying in a ditch for thirty days because they get infections and they don't have upper body strength. I mean,

some do, but they're relatively rare. On the other hand, men are basically little piglets, you drop them in the ditch, they roll around in it, doesn't matter, you know. These things are very real. On the other hand, if combat means being on an Aegis-class cruiser managing the computer controls for twelve ships and their rockets, a female may be again dramatically better than a male who gets very, very frustrated sitting in a chair all the time because males are biologically driven to go out and hunt giraffes. (Adjunct Professor Newt Gingrich, "Renewing American Civilization," Reinhardt College, 7 January 1995).

I do not know to what extent the men I spoke with may have believed that women are emotionally and physical incapable of combat, but I do know that however they felt about the idea, they did not raise it when I asked about gender integration. The only exception was the frequently raised issue of whether a 100-pound woman would be able to pull a wounded 200-pound man off the battlefield.

13. Advocates for women in combat point out that military women have already been prisoners of war, including the 83 Army and Navy nurses interned for three years by the Japanese in the Philippines during World War II. Even in this recent period of low American tolerance for military casualties, women prisoners of war, and even women coming home in body bags from the Gulf War, did not result in the public outcry predicted here. (Thirteen women were killed, and two were prisoners of war.) Opponents of women in combat respond that that "doesn't count" because the numbers were too small to reflect what the response would be in a war with more casualties.

14. Interview, male Army lieutenant colonel, 1998. (2-3-12)

15. Interview, male Air Force colonel, 1998. (1-3-01)

16. For a more detailed discussion of the multiple ways officers frame these problems, see Cohn (Forthcoming).

17. Although separating out myth from reality on this issue is beyond the scope of this article, a useful overview can be found in Francke (1997).

18. This point is emphasized by the 1999 Congressional Commission on Military Training and Gender-Related Issues. According to the Commission, "There is widespread misunderstanding about the purposes of the Services' physical fitness tests. The tests are designed to measure physical health and well-being. . . . Physical fitness tests are not measures of job-specific skills. The services should maintain this distinction and communicate it to all levels of personnel, including basic trainees" (Congressional Commission 1999).

19. At West Point, for example, the "Doctrine of Comparable Training" is based on the premise that the goal for female and male cadets should not be same outcome but "equivalent effort." Interview, colonel at U.S. Military Academy, 1998. (2-2-46). On the U.S. Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT), raw scores for push-ups, sit-ups, and a two-mile run are converted to a point-based scale which is designed to measure "equal level of effort for both genders."

20. Harry Summers, a retired Army colonel, challenges one of the arguments commonly made by men opposed to gender integration—"the hand grenade rule," which says that most women "cannot throw a hand grenade beyond its bursting radius, proof positive that they have no business in the Army." First he points out that women are still barred from direct combat roles (in the Army, infantry, armor, field artillery, Ranger, and Special Forces), and "Women assigned to signal, ordnance, quartermaster, transportation, military intelligence, and other such combat-support and combat-service-support units have precious little occasion to throw hand grenades in the first place." Second, he says that in his 38 years in the infantry (including Korea and Vietnam), he only had to use grenades once and that was rolling them down hill. His conclusion is "The standard for a female soldier and her combat-support and combat-service-support brethren is not how far they can throw a hand-grenade, but how far they can move combat forces to where throwing a grenade is necessary. It's also in ensuring they have hand grenades to throw, in keeping them up to date on whom to throw grenades [at] and patching them up if they throw them short. The standard should be how well she can do her job" (Summers 1997). Thanks are due to Lory Manning for sending this article to me.

21. Brenda Berkman made this comment during her presentation, "Gender-Integrated Training in the Uniform Services: The Firefighting Experience," Biennial Conference on Women in Uniform, Women's Research and Education Institute, Arlington, VA, 10 December 1998. Berkman became a firefighter after winning a sex discrimination lawsuit that led to revision of the physical abilities standards for firefighters and to New York City (NYC) hiring its first women firefighters. Currently, she is a lieutenant with Ladder Company 12 in NYC. She has a law degree and has consulted widely on issues relating to physical abilities standards.

22. The issue was framed in these terms by four of the women officers I interviewed.

23. One male Army major said to me, "Hey, if I'm injured on the battlefield, I'd way rather have the guy next to me be some totally out of shape 240-pound hulk than a skinny marathoner who does great on the PT tests" (Interview, 1999). (2-4-15)

24. This is clearly what pollsters like to call a *hot button issue*. Many things have changed a lot at the service academies since women entered in 1975. For some (including many academy alums from the all-male days), these represent the "feminization" of the academies, and the degradation or loss of the "warrior culture" (see, for example, Ricks 1997; Webb 1979). However, many faculty currently at the academies assert that most of the changes have been in response to changes in the world security environment and mission of the military, as well as changing ideas of leadership, and that they make the academies stronger (see, for example, Roush 1993, 1999). When I asked one woman senior officer about the complaint about PT standards, she pointed out that ideas about appropriate standards have varied a lot independent of gender; the standards that the men and women at the academy meet now are higher than the standards the men at the academy had to meet in the 1960s (the time when a lot of those now complaining about standards went through) (Interview, 1998). (2-2-46)

25. See for example, Elizabeth L. Hillman's (1994, 1999) work on decisions about women's uniforms in the national service academies. See also Meyer (1996) and Stiehm (1981).

26. In her luncheon speech on the first day of the 1999 WREI conference, Mary Wamsley, the 1999 DACOWITS Chair and a career police officer, told of her early days in policing and how difficult it was to chase a suspect over a fence in a skirt, hose, and pumps. During the rest of the conference, several other presenters referred to parallel apparel problems, except in the other cases, the practical problems were caused by having to wear uniforms or equipment designed for men, such as men's combat boots (Biennial Women in Uniform Conference, Women's Research and Education Institute, Arlington, VA, 10-11 December 1998).

27. Hence the rejoinder from military women that became the title of Judith Hicks Stiehm's edited collection, *It's Our Military Too!: Women and the U.S. Military* (1996).

28. The Congressional Commission on Military Training and Gender-Related Issues ran focus groups with enlisted personnel in all four services and found attitudes expressed that were similar to those I have described among officers. In their focus groups with Army enlisted personnel, for example, they report that "Practically all participants reported that physical standards for men and women were different. The majority of men perceived women's physical standards as unfairly lower than men's standards. 'I think it's wrong that, you know, females are fighting to get to go into combat situations, but . . . their physical fitness requirements are so diverse from males' (Male, USMC OPS Low GIU). 'They shouldn't have a double standard [for fitness]. A Marine is a Marine regardless of gender'" (Male, USMC TT Low GIU) (Congressional Commission on Military Training and Gender-Related Issues 1999).

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