1 Introduction

> Our job is to get the mission done and come back alive. Unless you've been in this environment or been deployed you cannot understand. Females are not as capable in dealing with the physical and emotional demands of Special Forces. Listen to the people who are here and don't just make that decision based on, "America wants women to be integrated everywhere." Well that's nice. It's a good conversation over the dinner table. Take that overseas where your life's on the line. And that's why I will leave if they do not listen to us, the guys on the teams. I'm telling you [integration] does not work.
>
> (John, Participant)

Resistance to organizational change is commonplace and has traditionally been conceptualized as resistance from workers to managerial initiatives that challenge the status quo of the organization (Piderit 2000). However, this view has largely been critiqued as ahistorical and lacking a nuanced understanding of organizational context (Kuipers et al., 2014; Pettrigrew et al., 2001). Moreover, several questions remain unanswered regarding the causes of resistance to organizational change (Kuipers et al., 2014). While there are certainly overt, specific ways that organizations and some individuals working within them attempt to keep women out of traditionally male-occupied professions, many of the contemporary obstacles to women's success are invisible and underexamined within this literature. Although some resistance is easily identifiable, other forms blend into the culture of the organization, making it difficult to pinpoint. The gendered nature of norms, practices, and policies within male-dominated organizations is rarely visible to the people who perpetuate them. However, they collectively become embedded in the organizational culture, which takes on an assumed naturalness or rightness that makes gendered practices hard to see.

We refer to this as *organizational obliviousness*, which calls attention to the intangible ways that stereotypes influence the everyday practices of the individual and organization. The power of organizational obliviousness, as an element of organizational resistance, lies in its covert nature. Obliviousness resides at the individual level; when most organizational actors with similar beliefs confirm it, it becomes reinforced at the cultural level. In turn, cultural practices are further entrenched at the institutional level by policies and norms. Unlike covert forms of resistance, organizational obliviousness is typically neither malicious nor intentional. It operates off norms and stereotypes built into society, culture, and organizations. Nonetheless, organizational obliviousness operates alongside covert resistance, which results in establishing and maintaining systemic discrimination and workplace inequity, making reform complicated. Our research looks to uncover patterns of practice perpetuated by

people in the organization that materialize into entrenched resistance to organizational change. While organizational obliviousness as a concept may apply to a variety of stereotypes based on race, gender, and other identity factors, here we focus on the recent resistance to gender integration in the military, specifically within Special Forces (SF).

John, like most of the male participants in our research, opposed gender integration. He was oblivious to the stereotypes he invoked about women and unaware of the subtle way he confirmed these stereotypes at the cultural level of the organization by claiming that all seasoned male soldiers know that integrating women is doomed. Lacking evidence to support his argument, John nonetheless believes that his voice as an experienced insider – and the voices of his male colleagues – should be the authoritative voice on the issue rather than leaving the decision to leaders or elected officials or evolving the organization to accommodate changing societal norms. John raises a compelling argument that soldiers' experiences should factor into the decision. However, in articulating this argument, John is oblivious to the reality that women have been prohibited from serving in SF; therefore, by virtue of policy, women could never weigh in as an authoritative voice about gender integration.

Organizational obliviousness is another component of resistance that creates barriers to equity that ultimately limit people with marginalized identities from being full participants in the workplace. John's quote captures the key tenets of this concept. He draws on gender stereotypes, confirms them at the cultural level of the organization, and does not recognize the tangible ways his organization has restricted the professional roles available for women. When John references "our job" and suggests that unless you have "been deployed" a person cannot relate to the work, he insinuates that the job and deployments are exclusively male activities and depicts an organization devoid of women. He even suggests the prospect of gender integration making "good" dinner conversation, indicating that this hypothetical situation is thought provoking and somewhat entertaining. John's comments omit women as active subjects in the military and illuminate the unnoticed ways resistance to gender equity becomes woven into the fabric of an organization.

Although John erases women's contributions, women have participated in every major military conflict in US history. Historical data documents that women have informally been a part of the US military since the Revolutionary War (Skaine, 1999), but they were unable to formally enlist until World War I (Devilbiss, 1990). At the end of World War II, the Women's Armed Service Integration Act of 1948 was the first policy to permanently recognize women's service to the military. Under this policy, women could serve but were barred from combat, not allowed to hold a rank higher than lieutenant colonel, and

were prohibited from having command over a man (Morden, 1990). Over time, some of these policies were revised to reflect changing gender norms in the military workplace, and others were further delineated. In 1994, the Department of Defense (DoD) enacted the Direct Ground Combat Exclusion Policy, which formally codified women's exclusion from combat positions in the military (Burrelli, 2013).

More recently, military leaders, politicians, and civilians have claimed that the U.S. Combat Exclusion Policy is at odds with the de facto reality that women are already engaged in direct combat (MacKenzie, 2015; Keenan, 2008). Addressing this contemporary state, the Military Leadership Diversity Commission released a report that recommended removal of the combat exclusion policy. By January 2013, then Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta announced the DoD was rescinding the policy and would begin to create gender-neutral occupational performance standards for all positions. Nearly all combat positions in the military were opened to women effective January 2016. Currently, the combat exclusion policy has changed, and military leaders are working to integrate positions in practice.

Even though the current policy has the potential to disrupt the masculine identity of the military writ large, the findings of our research, which come from original surveys and focus groups, indicate that persistent and pervasive patterns of inequality exist and remain unchallenged in the workplace. The male participants of our research are members of Special Forces, which is an elite component of Army Special Operations Command. Female participants come from other units within Army Special Operations Command. Our research locates most of this inequality in the traditional gender stereotypes ascribed to by most military members in our study. *Gender stereotypes* refer to the assumed emotional and physical differences between men and women as groups that are inappropriately applied to individuals. The systemic impact of gendered beliefs is masked in the context of the institution even though stereotypes are infused throughout cultural norms and organizational practices and policies.

1.1 Gendered Organizational Structures

Our research, which we place in conversation with the gendered organization literature, is not the first to recognize the gendered nature of practices and policies within the workplace (Acker, 1990). Workplace organizations are often thought to have distinctive identities, and the military is no exception (MacKenzie, 2015). *Organizational identities* are the statements of values that members perceive to be central and enduring to the organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Scholars once argued that organizational identities were fixed (e.g., Albert & Whetten, 1985). However, there is now a robust scholarly

conversation documenting how organizational identity shifts based on insider and outsider perceptions (Gioia et al., 2000) and the institutional and political contexts of the organization (Powell & DiMaggio, 2012). Gioia and colleagues (2000) argue that organizational identity is fraught with continual negotiation that leads to incremental change. This type of identity instability allows organizations to adapt to changing conditions in their environment and the military is not an exception.

Long recognized as a masculine organization, the military has not been immune from evolving political contexts and organizational demographic changes. Since 1973, the percentage of women serving in the military among enlisted ranks has increased sevenfold from 2 percent to 14 percent, and among officers, women's share has quadrupled – rising from 4 percent to 16 percent (Patten & Parker, 2011). However, the influx of female soldiers into the US armed forces has done little to quell the gendered culture of the military or alter expected gender roles within the institution (MacKenzie, 2015). Even as more women enter the military, Enloe (2000) argues the military's emphasis on gender differences is used to keep women in subordinate positions and maintain hegemonic masculinity as a central aspect of the military's identity. Familiar gender tropes often frame contemporary resistance to full integration and accentuate the social construction of men as "protectors" and women as "needing protection." These gendered constructions have continued to underscore men's position as belonging in the public sphere while relegating women to the private sphere (Elshtain, 1995). The military is not alone or unique in its ongoing struggle to diversify and become a more inclusive work environment. Resistance to gender integration has been commonly documented in many traditionally male-dominated organizations, such as policing (Prokos & Padavic, 2002; Martin & Jurik, 1996) and firefighting (Hulett et al., 2008). Beyond these traditionally male-dominated organizations, gendered practices and processes are also pervasive in other institutions including local government administration (Voorhees & Lange-Skaggs, 2015). As we discuss in detail in the ensuing sections, many of the subtly gendered practices operating at the micro and macro-levels that hold women back in careers outside of the military were also present in our exploration of gender integration in SF.

While much of the micro-level research of organizational identity focuses on the views of individuals both internal and external to the organization, there is also a robust discussion of organizational structures and macro-level issues. Organizations, in addition to individuals, may be gendered. A growing collection of scholars has argued that perceiving organizational structures as a neutral space is flawed and ignores the underlying assumptions regarding gender, race, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation that permeate the documents,

contracts, policies, and practices used to create and maintain organizations (Acker, 2006, 1990; Britton, 2000). The imagined worker in this "neutral" organization is a middle-class, middle-aged, white male. Yet, scholars contend that policies and practices, while gender-neutral on their face, are built around deeply embedded assumptions regarding gender (and other sociodemographic characteristics). This "gendered organizational logic" (Acker, 2006, 1990; Britton, 2000, 1997) reinforces social hierarchies outside and within the organization, recreating inequality regimes that live through the structured policies and practices of the organization, rather than through individual perceptions alone.

The concept of "gendered organizations" comes from Acker's seminal 1990 work, where she argues that organizational structures are not gender-neutral and that these gendered structures shape the culture and outcomes of organizations. Building on Acker's (1990) foundational work, Britton (2000) argues for more theoretical specificity in how we consider the concept of "gendered organizations" in our scholarship. She examines three theoretical strands of this concept. The first, most closely related to Acker's original work, argues that ideal-type bureaucratic organizations are inherently gendered; they have been defined, conceived, and structured with a masculine or feminine distinction and will thus reproduce these differences and advantages. The second is less theoretically grounded and largely focuses on the occupational level, arguing that occupations are gendered to the extent that one sex – male or female – dominates them. The third does not distinguish between the organizational and occupational levels, arguing that gendered discourse rooted in masculine hegemony reinforces gendered hierarchies advancing masculine notions of good leadership and management at the organizational and professional levels.

"The Schoolhouse," as it is known in the Special Operations community, at Ft. Bragg, North Carolina, exemplifies gendered organizational logic. Designated as a space to train Special Operations soldiers, the Schoolhouse was originally established with male-only barracks and restrooms. More recently, facilities have been installed to accommodate women when they are training at the Schoolhouse, but they are located a farther distance than the men's facilities. Consequently, women take longer to complete their hygiene needs in the morning and during breaks because they must travel farther to access facilities. At the Schoolhouse, women are attempting to fit into an environment that was designed with men in mind, and they try hard not to draw attention to the inadequacies of their accommodations. Even though the actual time to complete hygiene tasks is similar for men and women, on the surface it appears that women require more time, which reinforces the stereotype that women need the extra time for "primping" for the day. This physical layout creates a space that disadvantages

women and reinforces gender stereotypes, but this arrangement is not unique to the military. Plaskow (2008) notes that the lack of women's bathrooms in public space had everything to do with restricting women's movements and establishing who is welcomed into a profession. Using Congress as an example, there was not a women's bathroom near the Senate floor until 1993 or near the House of Representatives floor until 2011. Plaskow notes that the lack of bathrooms for women "function[s] as an explicit argument against hiring women or admitting them into previously all-male organizations" (pp. 52–3). If there are no "facilities" for women, organizations can draw on this history and make a case for excluding women, or other marginalized groups, because the physical space of the institution is not conducive to accommodating them.

Bathrooms function as a way to control access. Those who do not have easy access to the facilities are unable to fully participate. The need to travel to a faraway designated bathroom in the workplace, as women working in Congress did up until 2011, takes a toll on the women who are performing what becomes invisible, extra labor that adversely affects them. This labor was made visible during the 2016 presidential primary when Hillary Clinton was widely criticized for returning late from a commercial break during a televised debate. While some pundits quickly started speculating about her health or her commitment as a candidate, others noted the gendered nature of restroom accommodations at the debate facilities (Chemaly, 2015; Linskey, 2015). There were fewer women's restrooms, and they were farther away from the stage. Secretary Clinton had to travel a greater distance during the break than her male rivals to accomplish the same task. She was criticized for returning later than the men in the debate, but few noted that the physical structure of the venue was created for the convenience of male leaders on stage.

In research focused on women working in traditionally male-dominated organizations, Britton (2003, 1997) points out that it is not just the physical infrastructure that reinforces gendered organizations. She emphasizes that training for correctional officers defines the ideal officer as possessing a particular type of hegemonic masculinity; therefore, male recruits often appear more prepared and normatively in line with the efforts of the organization. While masculinity is not directly tied to the functions of the work, it is infused in the concept of the ideal worker. When women in these organizations perform well, they are often stereotyped by colleagues as masculine, with the assumption that their success has to do with their proximity to the male ideal rather than their ability to perform the gender-neutral tasks of the work (Jurik, 1988, 1985; Owen & Dennis, 1988; Zimmer, 1988). Connell (2006) criticizes the efforts of organizational reformers pushing for a gender-neutral understanding of work, noting that it is important to recognize the role gender does play within agencies.

The push to make gender-neutral workplaces may obfuscate what Kanter (1977) refers to as the tokenizing role that gender has in shaping organizational circumstances and the traditionally gendered divisions of labor. In her classic work on women in the corporate world, Kanter (1977) discussed tokenism, where a woman's presence (or that of a member of an underrepresented group) is highlighted by an organization to convey diversity and access to equal employment opportunities, when in practice the organization is using her presence to gloss over its lack of diversity and equality. Tokenism continues to be relevant in contemporary times, leading to different outcomes for minoritized employees. Kantar and other scholars argue that an individual can benefit from being tokenized because they may gain resources or attention, but overall, being tokenized is detrimental to the progress of women in the organization because it masks their limited numbers (Fuegen & Biernart, 2002; Goldenhar et al., 1998). Similarly, Lewis and Simpson (2012, 2010) argue that gendered dynamics are continually acted out within organizations; therefore, they must be made visible within organizations to study their effects and actively work toward reform.

Kanter (2008, 1977) presents the solution as a simple numbers game, contending that as more women enter an organization, they will acquire greater power that will ultimately level the playing field. However, the empirical evidence supporting this solution is mixed. While some studies in public organizations have found that increasing the number of women in leadership positions within an organization is a necessary precondition for altering gender-based power imbalances, other studies have concluded that female leadership has little impact (Saidel & Loscocco 2005; Kaiser et al., 2002; Dolan 2000). In addition, several critics have pushed back on Kanter's (1977) numbers-based solution, arguing that gender disadvantage is also infused in the structure of organizations, which reinforces the existing power dynamics (Lewis & Simpson, 2012; Zimmer, 1988). Gaining numbers is not the same as gaining power within organizations; therefore, relying on gender-neutral concepts is not a panacea for solving inequity (Zimmer, 1988). Rather, Lewis and Simpson (2010, 2012) argue that scholars must unearth the ways in which gender shapes the policies and practices of organizations. Seeing equity as a moral imperative, Connell (2006) asserts that public organizations have an obligation to excavate and reform gendered practices in an effort to move away from resistance to more equitable workplaces.

There are two broad conceptualizations of organizational resistance. The first comes from public management scholarship and the second from organizational culture scholarship. In the public management literature, organizational resistance has been used to describe both organizational-level actions and traits

that create barriers to change (Jurik, 1985). Much of this literature focuses on the structural aspects of organizations; however, Kumar and Kant (2006) argue that organizational resistance to change can be described on two levels: "structural" and "cultural." Organizational culture is composed of the beliefs and expectations that "produce norms or commitments – informal rules for behavior – that provide a context which individuals in an organization can interpret and approach their work" (Kumar & Kant, 2006, p. 148). Dull (2010) writes, "Public sector leaders attempt to cultivate organizational culture as a means of controlling administrative behavior and building organizational competence, defined as the skill and capacity to accomplish necessary tasks" (p. 858). From this perspective, effective performance follows an established culture. A primary characteristic of organizational culture is its resistance to change (Dull, 2010; Schein, 2010). Gagliardi (1986) notes, "When new strategies assume the presence of new values that are antagonistic towards traditional ones, there is very little chance of them ever being carried through" (p. 129). Adding to the challenges, Schein (2010) contends that organizational members resist change because their culture tells them "who they are, how to behave toward each other, and how to feel good about themselves" (p. 29). Changing organizational culture can produce significant anxiety among members because it erodes the assumptions they have been using to derive comfort and understanding about themselves (Schein, 2010, 1990).

The underlying anxiety that fuels much of the organizational resistance to women in the military is not unique to this institution. Recently, much of the discussion around inequality in organizations has focused on unconscious or implicit bias, which refers to the broad underlying stereotypes that often animate decision making (Jolls & Sunstein, 2006). Research findings on unconscious and implicit bias have consistently demonstrated that traditionally marginalized groups uniquely face subtle barriers in many workplaces because people routinely rely on heuristics or mental shortcuts that are foregrounded in stereotypes (Jolls & Sunstein, 2006). Specific to racism, Bonilla-Silva and Dietrich (2011) refer to this process as color-blind racism to capture the "unacknowledged, contextual standpoints that provide the intellectual (and moral) building blocks whites use to explain racial matters" (p. 192). Since people are largely unaware of their biases, or the ways in which they are relying on standard social scripts, they rarely work to overcome unconscious bias despite its influence on individual decision making (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Jolls & Sunstein, 2006). Gender bias operates in a similar manner.

Once people use gender as a cue for a social script, it is hard to undo, even in workplace settings where other identity factors may be more salient (Ridgeway, 1997). Ridgeway (1997) refers to many of these intangible obstacles that

women face as the "interactional gender mechanisms that operate as the 'invisible hand'" reinforcing gender hierarchies within the workplace (p. 218). Ridgway goes on to argue that these gendered status beliefs are structural within the workplace. Institutional practices, like job evaluations and internal labor markets, incorporate gendered assumptions and stereotypes. Even as organizations open to women, these assumptions and status beliefs persist through organizational inertia. Organizational politics also come into play as men attempt to maintain their advantages through overt and covert practices. Leadership is often male-dominated with male views represented in decision making and subtle biases rarely called out in spaces of organizational leadership. Sex-based stereotypes and occupational sex segregation become increasingly normalized even when gender is irrelevant to the functions of the job. The "invisible hand" of gender biases results in men regularly acting in their own self-interests, even if unintentionally. This behavior results in differential outcomes for men and women.

Placing the gendered organizational literature and unconscious bias scholarship in conversation suggests that individual legal cases and specific policy change will not be enough to reform male-dominated organizations. Our research begins to bridge these literatures using empirical data that originates from an organizational insider perspective that provides a fertile entry point for identifying the individual gendered beliefs and day-to-day practices that maintain organizational resistance to change and an inequitable work environment (Lewis & Simpson, 2010). Throughout the Element, we introduce stories and flesh out the nuances of organizational obliviousness, relying on in-depth qualitative data from focus groups with active duty soldiers and two surveys administered to active duty men serving in SF and women serving in Special Operations. We find that individuals rely on stereotypes and heuristic shortcuts, often without malice, but their actions lead to systematic errors that reinforce other institutionalized forms of discrimination in the workplace (Jolls & Sunstein, 2006). As we argue throughout this Element, organizational obliviousness to gender inequality exists – and must be intentionally confronted – on multiple levels within an organization.

1.2 Research Design and Background

Our data comes from a grant-funded project examining soldiers' perspectives regarding the potential barriers and benefits of integrating women into Special Forces, which served two research purposes. The first purpose and more immediate aspect of the project was providing high-ranking US Army personnel with an assessment of the range and severity of the barriers that could

potentially impede gender integration. The second purpose and longer-term aspect of this project was using the US Army as a site for conducting exploratory research on gender and organizations. We used a sequential mixed methods design composed of focus groups that were in turn used to design two surveys eliciting soldiers' opinions regarding the potential barriers and benefits of integrating women into SF (Hesse-Biber, 2015). Given the lack of data available on the topic, we were interested in developing theory from soldiers' lived experiences and exploring how these experiences have shaped their beliefs about gender integration using grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). This methodology provided us with flexibility to pursue unanticipated topics that surfaced during the focus groups and include them in subsequent groups, and ultimately our survey design (Charmaz, 2006).

1.2.1 Background

SF, commonly known as the Green Berets, are an exclusive unit of Army Special Operations Command. Fewer than 10 percent of the men who apply to become a Green Beret end up making it through screening and assessment. SF teams are regularly deployed in small-person units called Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA). When deployed, SF operators often closely rely on one another, with no forward operating base or support teams to fall back on. Even when they are training and stateside, most ODAs spend significant on-duty and off-duty time together.

Female participants in our study came from Civilian Affairs (CA), Military Information Support Operations (MISO), and Cultural Support Teams (CSTs) – all units within Army Special Operations. Each of these units serves as support for SF when they are deployed. CA and MISO are long-standing units that are gender integrated. CA focuses on engaging with local populations and building strategic connections with local leaders, whereas MISO focuses on intelligence gathering and analysis. CST is a newer unit, developed in response to current military conflicts. CSTs are exclusively female and recruited to deploy with SF units specifically to interact with women and children in Iraq and Afghanistan.

1.2.2 Research Design

Our data was collected in 2013 and 2014 after the ground combat exclusion policy was rescinded, but when Special Operations was still considering asking for an exception. We conducted twenty-seven focus groups, with a nonrandom sample of 198 participants at multi-day site visits at five military bases. Twenty-three focus groups consisted of men and four focus groups consisted of women. Our professional position as military outsiders who lacked a preconceived