Navigating the Bow Wave of Change: The Felt Experience of Belonging to the United States Naval Academy's First Gender-Integrated Class

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NAVIGATING THE BOW WAVE OF CHANGE: THE FELT EXPERIENCE OF BELONGING TO THE UNITED STATES NAVAL ACADEMY’S FIRST GENDER-INTEGRATED CLASS

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

May 2024

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ABSTRACT

On July 6, 1976 the United States Naval Academy (USNA) admitted its first-ever gender-integrated class. I was a member of that class, along with 81 female classmates who entered USNA with the class of 1980 (USNA ‘80). Those classmates were pioneers, though few of them realized at the time just how long and how hard their journey would be. The numerous challenges faced by USNA ‘80 on their journey through the Academy have been well documented (Gelfand, 2008). But there has been far less research on the lived experience of that pioneering class. This study fills a gap between historical and academic accounts of the gender integration at USNA and the felt experience of both the men and women of USNA ‘80 who lived through that integration process. One common theme that emerged was the lack of support my female classmates felt from some of their male peers. This finding led to an exploration of how the culture and traditions at USNA nurtured and reinforced the prejudice displayed by those male classmates. This study also looked the coping strategies employed to navigate the difficulties of gender integration and how being part of that integration process impacted the lives of USNA ‘80 long after graduation. A key feature of this study is my use of an artform (in this case documentary filmmaking) to both conduct and present my research. Following Eisner’s (2008) argument that art can be considered a form of knowledge, I first conducted extensive, on-camera interviews with members of USNA ’80. Those interviews were then examined using narrative and thematic analysis and the resulting findings are presented in the form of a video documentary. The goal of this singular documentary parallels the goal of this study: to create a visceral, in-depth description of the gender integration process at USNA from the perspective of the first class to live through it.
DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to the United States Naval Academy class of 1980. Beat Army!
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Acknowledgements for this study are in the closing credit sequence for the Findings Chapter documentary.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Background to Study

Tuesday, July 6, 1976, was a sweltering summer day on the Chesapeake Bay. It was Induction Day at the U.S. Naval Academy in Annapolis, Maryland. Twelve hundred ninety-nine students (most just out of high school) stood at attention in Tecumseh Court sweating profusely in their newly issued “white works” uniforms. On command, they raised their right hands and took the oath of office to become midshipmen in the Naval Academy’s class of 1980. I was there that day, earnestly swearing to support and defend our constitution, along with those other male classmates and 81 women. With that oath, those women became the first female students ever admitted to the U.S. Naval Academy (USNA).

That momentous change had been set in motion on October 8, 1975 when President Gerald Ford signed Public Law 94-106, which required women be admitted to the three federal service academies with the incoming class of 1980. The mandated gender integration of the service academies marked a significant course change for USNA, which had been an all-male institution for the 131 years of its existence. But the change was not completely unexpected. In September of 1973, a woman who had applied to the Naval Academy and been denied admission because of her gender unsuccessfully sued the Secretary of Defense in federal court. And throughout 1974 and 1975, the National Organization for Women (NOW) actively pressed Congress to allow women into the service academies (Gelfand, 2006).

The increased pressure for gender integration at USNA was just one manifestation of the larger women’s movement which was in full swing in 1976. It’s important to remember that during the early-mid 70’s there was a great deal of optimism that achievement of total gender
equality was not that far off. The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) had passed through Congress with significant bipartisan support in 1972, and by 1976 the amendment only needed ratification by four more states to be adopted. In 1973 the Supreme Court had ruled in Roe v Wade by a 7-2 majority that the Constitution protected the right of a woman to choose whether to have an abortion. 1973 was also the year Billie Jean King beat Bobby Riggs in the highly publicized tennis match touted as the “Battle of the Sexes.”

However, despite these advances there was pushback against the women’s movement. One opponent was Phyllis Schlafly who many believe was primarily responsible for defeating the ERA (Mansbridge, 2015). One of Schlafly’s arguments against the ERA was particularly relevant for the Naval Academy’s class of 1980, as she argued that passage of the amendment would lead to women having to serve in combat, which at the time was prohibited by law (Marley, 2000). The prohibition against women serving in combat (which Schlafly wanted to preserve) was one of the most often cited reasons for why women should not be allowed to attend the service academies (Gelfand, 2006). The academies, it was argued, existed to produce combat leaders, and, since women could not serve in combat, they should not be at the academies.

It was against this backdrop that the class of 1980 entered the Naval Academy in 1976. On the one hand, recent achievements by the women’s movement made the gender integration of the Naval Academy seem like a logical and achievable goal. On the other hand, there was mounting pushback against redefining traditional men’s and women’s roles, both in the military and in society at large. The women who entered the Academy on that July day in 1976 knew their journey would not be easy. Indeed, for many the challenge of an Academy education was
one of the principal reasons they chose USNA. Those women were pioneers, though few of them
realized at the time just how long and how hard their journey would be.

**Statement of Problem**

The class of 1980 became the subject of intense attention and media scrutiny almost immediately. On that first day in July there were twelve television crews and 113 media representatives roaming the Academy grounds to record the event (Gelfand, 2009, p. 140). Interest in the female midshipmen remained high during the four years the class of 1980 was in attendance. News stories and articles about individual students were common in both national and hometown papers. There were also academic studies on the effectiveness of the gender integration process (e.g., Durning, 1978; Harrison, 1980). However, studies such as those by Durning (1978) and Harrison (1980) were quantitative in nature and focused primarily on the performance metrics of both male and female midshipmen and the stated attitudes of different groups of midshipmen regarding the integration process. The numbers in these studies gave little indication of the daily, lived experiences of the men and women who were at the center of the integration effort. There was, however, a common thread running through both the popular media coverage (e.g., Vanderbilt, 1968) and the academic studies (e.g., Durning, 1978; Harrison, 1980): the gender integration process was not going as smoothly as hoped.

Four years later, 55 of the initial 81 female midshipmen graduated (an attrition rate only slightly higher than that of their male classmates) and were commissioned as officers in the Navy and Marine Corps. However, the difficulties of belonging to the first gender-integrated class were far from over. Women still were not allowed to serve in combat, which severely restricted both the career paths open to them, and their ultimate promotability into the Navy’s highest ranks. Additionally, many of the women encountered continuing resistance as they
moved through their assignments in the Navy and Marine Corps. As their careers unfolded, though, interest in the class of 1980 waned. For instance, there were no longitudinal studies which revisited the female graduates at various points in their careers to assess the impact of their time at USNA. It wasn’t until 18 years after graduation that the first female member of USNA ‘80 wrote a book about her time at the Naval Academy (Disher, 1998). There is only one other book besides Disher’s (1998) to provide an insider’s first-hand look at USNA’s class of 1980. It was published in 2019 by the first (and only) Black female graduate from the class, Janie Mines (2019).

Twenty-six years after graduation, historian Michael Gelfand (2006) wrote a book describing the most significant changes to occur at USNA between the end of World War II and the year 2000. His work is well-researched, but the experiences of the class of 1980 account for only one 27-page chapter in his 382-page book. And the interviews Gelfand conducted with members of the class of 1980 are only used sparingly to illustrate points made by his narrative. Additionally, none of the studies and accounts mentioned above look at anything other than the time the class of 1980 spent at USNA. There is no data in this prior research on how being a part of the first gender-integrated class impacted the lives of those classmates after graduation from the Academy.

Initial conversations in my pilot studies revealed some common themes threaded through the experiences of my female classmates. One common thread was the lack of support they felt from many of their male classmates. The women expected some pushback from the upper classes (which, by definition, were the last all-male classes that would graduate from USNA), but they found the prejudice displayed by their own classmates who had entered the Academy when they did to be particularly disheartening. Survey data conducted on the class of 1980 while they were
at the Academy, showed that 60% of the women’s male classmates did not think women belonged at USNA (Durning, 1978).

Unfortunately, one of the things missing from the existing research is a deep, qualitative understanding of why many men in the class of 1980 felt women did not belong at USNA, and how the culture and traditions at the Academy nurtured and reinforced the prejudice displayed by those male classmates. Another observation from my pilot study is that it took well over 20 years for some of my classmates, both male and female, to put their experiences at the Academy into perspective. None of the changing perspectives alluded to by my classmates in those exploratory interviews are captured in any of the existing literature.

It has been over 40 years since the Naval Academy class of 1980 threw their caps in the air and graduated. The men and women who stood beside me that day have long since finished their military service. Many have raised families along the way, and most have set out on second and, sometimes even, third careers. But the legacy of four years at Annapolis as part of that ground-breaking class has manifested itself in their lives in numerous ways that are only evident with the perspective of time and distance. Within their experiences are valuable lessons about the process of attaining meaningful and lasting diversity, equity, and inclusion in an organization.

This study fills a need for a thick, in-depth description of the gender integration process at USNA from the perspective of those who lived through it. I have attempted to capture what has not been adequately documented in the literature: the lived experiences of the USNA class of 1980 as members of the first gender-integrated class at that institution. Research conducted over 20 years after the class of 1980 graduated still showed significant pockets of resistance to the presence of women at USNA (Lewis, 2005). Understanding the roots of that resistance as
initially experienced by the class of 1980 could be significant to anyone seeking to understand the forces that both support and oppose integration of an “other” into a potentially resistant environment.

**Purpose of Study/Research Questions**

The principal question I explored in this study was this: What did it feel like to live through the gender integration process at the Naval Academy and how was both resistance and support of that change subjectively experienced? This is, of course, a highly individual question, with as many answers as there are classmates. But there are certainly similarities in the experiences of the men and women who rode the bow wave of that social change. Those similarities shed light on how significant social change (in this case gender integration) is both supported and resisted, and how that support or resistance affects the lives of those who (willingly or not) navigated the bow wave of that change.

As I explored the process of gender integration at USNA, the following questions helped focus my study:

1. As reflected in the experiences of my classmates, how did the unique culture at USNA affect the gender integration process?

2. What coping strategies were employed by members of my class to manage the difficulties of gender integration?

3. In what ways did the members of my class make sense of their experiences at USNA over time?

As discussed in more detail in the methodology chapter, the primary method for researching these questions was on-camera interviews with members from the class of 1980. The
goal of conducting and analyzing those interviews as visual data was to create an atypical dissertation with the findings presented as a video documentary.
CHAPTER 2
LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will review some of the studies, articles, and books that shed light on the gender integration challenges at the U.S. Naval Academy (USNA) as they apply (or could be applied) to the experiences of the Naval Academy’s class of 1980. Specifically, I will examine research from five different subject areas, each of which illuminates key aspects of those challenges. These five areas can be thought of as concentric circles, with the first subject being the most specific and the fifth subject being the broadest and most inclusive. The five subject areas I will explore are as follows:

1. The gender integration of the class of 1980 at USNA: This research focuses specifically on the challenges of gender integration at USNA as experienced by the first co-ed class.

2. Significant challenges related to cultural changes at USNA prior to gender integration: This research covers previous cultural changes undertaken by USNA, including racial integration and the complete restructuring of the academic and professional training programs.

3. Gender integration efforts at the other service academies: This research studies how the Military Academy at West Point and the Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs each dealt with gender integration.

4. Women in the armed forces: These studies look at gender integration challenges faced by female officers and enlisted members across all branches of the service.

5. Women in business: This is the broadest and most studied subject area covering corporate culture’s obstacles to gender integration.
In addition to reviewing literature in these five subject areas, I will take a brief look at Schein’s theories of organizational culture (1985) as a framing lens through which to view the unique culture of the Naval Academy.

Section One: The Gender Integration of USNA’s Class of 1980

First-hand Accounts

Arguably the most important book about the female midshipmen in the class of 1980 is *First Class: Women Join the Ranks at the Naval Academy* (Disher, 1998). Disher was a member of that first class, and her book follows two female classmates on their four-year journey through USNA. However, a key failing of the book from a research perspective is that the accounts are fictionalized. One of the characters is based on Disher herself, but the other is “a composite based on several female classmates” (Disher, 1998, p. x). Given that the accounts are fictionalized, the possibility of dramatic license must be acknowledged, and the ability to verify some of the events depicted through follow-on research is limited. Yet even with this limitation, the book is valuable for its detail-rich depiction of life within the Academy’s walls. The themes of isolation, harassment, role confusion, and lack of administrative support, recurring repeatedly in the literature, are given full, period-specific voice here. It is also important to note that although Disher changed the names and identifying details of her characters, she was adamant that every incident in the book reflected an actual occurrence: “I didn’t put anything in the book that I didn’t hear firsthand from the person that it happened to” (S. Disher, personal communication, December 5, 2019). Beyond the fictionalization of characters, a further drawback of the book is that it only depicts the time the class of 1980 spent at USNA. There is no indication of how the experiences at USNA affected the alumnae’s naval careers or their life beyond the service.
The only other book written by an alumna of 1980 is *No Coincidences: Reflections of the First Black Female Graduate of the United States Naval Academy* (Mines, 2019). Unlike Disher’s (1998) book, Mines’ account is not a fictionalized narrative but is instead structured as an episodic series of reflections on how her faith-based upbringing prepared her for specific challenges she faced at the Academy. However, the book is not a chronological narrative. Its episodic structure, while compelling as it moves from one challenge to the next, fails to paint a complete picture of her time at USNA and gives little insight into the routine of her daily life. Still, Mines’ perspective as the first and only black woman in her class does provide unique insights on race, faith, and personal determination in the face of near-constant adversity in an often-hostile environment. Unfortunately, like Disher’s (1998) book, Mines’ story concludes with graduation and does not provide any insight into how her experiences at USNA affected the rest of her life.

**Academic Research**

There was also research done on and with the class of 1980 while they were at the Academy. The most frequently cited study gauged the attitudes of male midshipmen of all four classes towards the female midshipmen during the 1976–77 academic year (Durning, 1978). Relying on the *contact hypothesis*, a concept that postulated greater acceptance with increased contact, Durning predicted that as the remaining all-male classes at the Academy graduated and more women entered in the incoming classes, male midshipmen’s attitudes toward the women would become more positive. Her findings only somewhat supported this prediction. Tomlinson replicated Durning’s study in 1979, 1980, 1981, and 1986 (Gill et al., 1997). His findings supported Durning’s work, showing “slight improvements…in male attitudes toward women, especially following the graduation of the final all-male classes” (Gill et al., 1997, p. 117).
Both Durning’s and Tomlinson’s work relied on surveys administered to the midshipmen in a classroom setting. I remember taking those surveys myself as a midshipman. Despite assurances our answers were anonymous, we were also regularly reminded that as midshipmen we were now “government property” with little to no expectation of privacy. This mixed messaging led me to always answer sensitive questions carefully, taking into account my perception of the administration’s agenda. Assuming other midshipmen were equally careful, the results of these surveys could have shown greater acceptance for the women than actually existed.

Shortly after the class of 1980 graduated, Harrison (a civilian professor at USNA) working with Leadbetter (an alumna of 1980) compared male and female midshipmen based on existing measures of performance (e.g., GPAs, physical fitness scores, selection to leadership positions; Harrison & Leadbetter, 1980). Of note, they found significant differences between the performance of the women in 1980 and those in the subsequent classes of 1981, 1982, and 1983. The women from the class of 1980 showed “an atypical profile on most of the studies administered relative to women in other classes” (Harrison & Leadbetter, 1980, p. 2). The study’s conclusion was that as subsequent classes graduated, “the history of the Naval Academy as an ‘all male institution’ will be replaced by the new reality of an integrated Brigade of Midshipmen” (Harrison & Leadbetter, 1980, p. 2).

Each of the above studies acknowledged the difficulties experienced by the class of 1980, yet each study also opined that the most difficult challenges associated with gender integration at USNA had been met and that full acceptance of the women in future classes was a foregone conclusion. While the administration understandably embraced these overly optimistic
assessments, accounts of the experiences of subsequent classes show that female midshipmen continued to face serious discrimination well into the early 2000’s (e.g., Gelfand, 2006).

Other relevant research done at USNA in the years since the class of 1980 graduated include Gelfand’s (2006) book *Sea Change at Annapolis: The United States Naval Academy 1949-2000* and *The Herndon Climb: A History of the United States Naval Academy’s Greatest Tradition* by McNeal and Tomasheski (2020). Each of these books provides valuable insight into the journey of the class of 1980 through the Academy. Gelfand’s book in particular does an excellent job describing the Washington politics of the mid-70s which led to Public Law 94-106 mandating the integration of the academies. These books also look beyond the class of 1980 and show how many of the challenges experienced by that first class continued to plague subsequent classes far longer than the administration expected. However, the research supporting Gelfand’s book is now over 20 years old and does not reflect the environment at the Academy or the experiences of its graduates beyond 2000. An additional limitation of Gelfand’s work is that Gelfand himself is not a USNA graduate. While his outsider’s perspective serves him well for the majority of his research, I noticed several small inaccuracies in his descriptions of life at USNA and his depiction of the class of 1980. McNeal and Tomasheski (2020) on the other hand, have an insider’s perspective (McNeal graduated from USNA in 1986), and their book is much more recent, but their research on gender issues was limited to documenting the tradition of climbing Herndon monument (a rite-of-passage event which only occurs once a year).

**Primary Sources**

In addition to first-person narratives and academic research, numerous primary sources documented the journey of 1980 as it occurred. News articles about and interviews with both male and female midshipmen captured contemporaneous events and opinions related to the
arrival of women at the Academy (e.g., Coakley, 1975). While acknowledging that such material at best provides only a momentary snapshot of a specific event, these sources are invaluable for providing period-accurate details and triangulating the stories told by my classmates.

Other relevant primary source material includes a monthly midshipman-produced satirical magazine called *The Log* (e.g., “Salty Sam,” 1977; Vause, 1976) and the Alumni Association magazine *Shipmate* (e.g., “The Mail Boat,” 1978). Both periodicals routinely published articles and letters to the editor discussing issues related to the female midshipmen. A common thread running through many of these articles and letters was the opposition of many USNA alumni to gender integration and their opinion that allowing women to attend the Academy was rendering the school incapable of fulfilling its mission of producing combat leaders. In a partial attempt to counterbalance these narratives, midshipman Beth Leadbetter had a recurring column in *Shipmate* during her senior year entitled *A Few Inches From the Yard* in which she discussed life at the Academy from her perspective (Leadbetter, 1979). Information from these sources provides valuable firsthand context about the environment in which the Academy’s integration efforts took place, and while some of the literature I examined references these primary sources, there is a great deal of information here that has not been fully mined as it relates to the gender integration of the class of 1980.

One event which occurred in November of 1979 deserves specific mention because of its enduring deleterious effects. That month, *Washingtonian Magazine* published an article entitled *Women Can’t Fight* by former Academy graduate and critically acclaimed author James Webb (Webb, 1979). In the article, Webb put forth the thesis that women could never effectively lead men in combat and therefore did not belong at Annapolis. The article caused a tumultuous uproar and was immediately denounced by the Academy’s superintendent (Bisbee, 1979). However,
because of the high-profile career Webb would go on to have (he later served as Secretary of the Navy and eventually became a U.S. senator), the article kept resurfacing, and each time it sparked new debates about the proper role of women in the service (e.g., Brooks, 2017; Disher, 2006; Roush, 1997). While this article and its aftermath are consistently mentioned in literature on the class of 1980, its continuing impact on both gender integration at the Academy and on Webb himself has not been fully explored.

**Civilian Faculty**

Another area of research into the journey of USNA’s class of 1980 involves the civilian professors at the Academy. Unlike the other service academies, 50% of the faculty at USNA are civilian, tenure-track professors. As such, they provide a continuity of perspective unavailable from either the midshipmen or the active-duty military officers who rotate through the Academy’s administration on 3-year tours. In their article *Bridging the Gaps: Reflections of Two Civilian Professors at the U.S. Naval Academy*, Purkitt and Mattox (1999) discussed the challenges of being two of the first female civilian professors hired at USNA in the late seventies. Their unique experiences provided insight not only into the issues faced by the female midshipmen (and how they changed during the tenure of the authors), but also into the cultural integration issues the authors themselves faced in the predominantly male institution. The perspective of Purkitt and Mattox is limited, however, because they were both in the same academic department; and while other civilian professors have done research during their time at the Academy (e.g., Fleming, 2005; French, 2004), there is little written about the gender integration process by civilian professors who were at the Academy during the 4 years the class of 1980 was in attendance.
Post-Graduation Research

Despite the intense interest the USNA ’80 women generated while they were at the Academy, there are relatively few sources that capture their experiences after they graduated. In 1985, an alumna of 1980 conducted a survey of her female classmates’ experiences and outlooks in the 5 years following graduation (Lowndes, 1985). Lowndes found 65% of the women would have attended the Academy again, even with the knowledge of what it would be like. However, in summarizing her data, Lowndes remarked, “What conclusions can one draw about the women who graduated in 1980? None. There is no typical female graduate” (Lowndes, 1985, p. 22).

Also during the mid-80s, six of the alumnae from the class of 1980 contributed to the oral history program facilitated by the U.S. Naval Institute (Sweeney, 2016). These interviews are significant because in addition to discussing their time at USNA, the women provided a detailed look at the continuing challenges they faced in their first assignments as active-duty naval officers. But one limitation with these interviews is that the women were not revisited at later points in their careers, even though three of the women completed 20 years or more of service and one of them went on to achieve the rank of Rear Admiral. Additionally, at least one of the women in the oral history compilation noted that some of her thoughts and opinions had changed since the mid-80’s. When reviewing a section of her interview from 1985 thirty years later, Lowndes said, “I have since changed my opinion drastically…time and distance make a difference in your perspective” (B. Lowndes, personal communication, April 5, 2019).

Section One Conclusions

This brief look at literature covering the gender integration process at the Naval Academy as experienced by the class of 1980 reveals there are several areas open to further research. For example, what more could be learned about the dynamics of the integration process by placing
the felt experiences of my classmates more completely in the context in which they occurred? From the perspective of my classmates (and with the added wisdom of hindsight), what practical and implementable actions could the administration have taken to further facilitate their integration? Moreover, looking past their time at Annapolis, how did their experience at USNA impact their time in the Navy and beyond?

**Section Two: Significant Cultural Changes at USNA Prior to Gender Integration**

Initiating change at the tradition-proud (and tradition-bound) institution of the Naval Academy has never been easy. It has been said the Academy is “a hundred and sixty years of tradition unmarred by progress” (Gelfand, 2006, p. xv). But it has also been said “the Academy, much like the rest of the Department of Defense, is at the forefront of American society in implementing rules and incentive structures designed to promote meaningful social integration” (Purkitt & Mattox, 1999, p. 157). The admission of women to Annapolis in 1976 was not the first significant cultural change undertaken in the Academy’s history. A look at the literature documenting two previous evolutionary challenges faced by USNA provides an additional lens through which to view the Academy’s gender integration efforts.

**Racial Integration**

The first Black midshipman was admitted to the Academy in 1872. Two others followed in 1873 and 1874. Each of these first midshipmen either resigned or was dismissed for academic deficiency after about a year (Schneller, 2005). Three other Black midshipmen would be admitted in the 20th century before Wesley Brown would become the first African American to graduate in 1949 (Gelfand, 2006). It then took until 1975 (one year before the class of 1980 arrived) for USNA to commission its 100th Black graduate (Bodner, 1999).
Unlike gender integration, racial integration at the Naval Academy did not come about through a singular change to public law. The long road towards racial equality is well-documented in two books by Robert Schneller (2005, 2008). Schneller’s first book (2005) gives an in-depth look at the first six Black midshipmen, concluding with Brown’s graduation in 1949. His second book (2008) continues the story through 2006, and this research permits comparisons between the challenges faced by the first Black midshipmen and those which confronted the first female midshipmen. However, one limitation of these books is the fact that Schneller is neither African American, nor a graduate of the Naval Academy. So while his books are meticulously researched and documented, he lacks first-hand experience of his subject matter.

One example of the ways racial integration paralleled gender integration is seen in the one-on-one relationships midshipmen in these integrating groups had with their classmates. In his book, Gelfand (2006) cited an interview with William Lawrence, who was a company-mate of Wesley Brown in 1949 (Note: William Lawrence would go on to be the Superintendent of the Naval Academy when the class of 1980 graduated, and his own daughter would be a member of the class of 1981). In the interview, Lawrence recalled that Brown “was very popular in our company…he was well accepted and liked” (Gelfand, 2006, p. 54). This acceptance by company-mates foreshadowed the acceptance that individual female midshipmen in the class of 1980 received from the males in their companies. In words that echo the recollection of Lawrence, a male midshipman from the class of 1980 said of one of his female classmates, “Everybody that knew Robin became a friend of Robin…everybody liked Robin” (D. Meyer, personal communication, December 14, 2019). A closer comparison of the lived experiences of these two integrating groups could shed additional light on the gender integration process.
In further research on racial integration at USNA, Bodner (1999) looked at the careers of Black graduates from the Naval Academy in an attempt to “estimate how long it takes from the day a president orders a new social policy to the day when that policy is an integral part of the military culture” (p. 290). According to Bodner, full acceptance of any social change takes at least a generation, because “movements right or left in American history are not due to individual people changing their political beliefs, but rather to younger generations supplanting older ones with differing viewpoints” (Bodner, 1999, p. 291). It also takes naval officers over 20 years to reach the rank of admiral, and 10 to 15 years beyond that before they could become Superintendent of the Naval Academy or the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) and have a significant impact on policy affecting USNA. Looking at the numbers of Black graduates across the years and the lengths of their careers, Bodner calculated that 2005–2010 was the earliest window in which a Black Naval Academy graduate could have become Superintendent or CNO. To date, neither of these positions has been held by a Black naval officer. But it should be noted that an important milestone for both gender and racial integration was achieved in 2014 when Admiral Michelle Howard (USNA class of 1982) was appointed as Vice CNO, making her the second highest ranking officer in the Navy, and the highest ranking African American and woman in Naval history. Yet, even with the achievements of Admiral Howard, it is obvious that the full realization of racial integration in the Navy, much like the full acceptance of women in both the Navy and at the Naval Academy, has not yet been achieved.

**The Academic Revolution**

Beyond the admission, integration, and acceptance of previously excluded groups, over the years the Naval Academy has faced other challenges related to its traditions and methods of instruction. In *Neither Athens nor Sparta?* John P. Lovell (1979) explored what he calls the
“renaissance” of academic reform which occurred at the Academy beginning in the late 1950s. Lovell argued that prior to this reform (which occurred in an analogous manner at all the service academies), USNA was essentially a trade school that had more in common with a seminary than an academic institution. During these years of change (which continued through the early 1970’s), the Academy completely revamped both the plebe (i.e., first-year) indoctrination system and the academic program. Much of the traditional hazing associated with training plebes was reduced or eliminated, and the lock-step academic curriculum in which all midshipmen took the same courses was replaced with a program featuring academic majors and electives.

None of these changes were greeted enthusiastically by midshipmen, the administrative staff, or Academy alumni. In The Midshipman Culture and Educational Reform, Todd Forney (2004) surveyed over 1000 alumni from the classes of 1946 to 1976 about their experiences at USNA during these changes to the academic and training programs. The picture of resistance painted by his research offers a hindsight prediction of the resistance the women would face in 1976.

The work of both Lovell and Forney is deepened by the fact that each author was a service Academy graduate (Lovell from West Point and Forney from USNA), and each had a deep, experience-informed understanding of cadet and midshipman culture. Of particular note, Forney deliberately ended his research before the first female midshipmen arrived because he thought the integration of women “demands a study in its own right” (Forney, 2000, p. 10).

Arguably the best window into the lived experience of midshipmen during the academic and training revolutions of the late 1960’s is technically a work of fiction. James Webb’s novel A Sense of Honor (1981) follows the interactions of a plebe (first year), the senior responsible for training that plebe, and their company officer (an alum recently returned from Vietnam) through
a week in 1968. Each of the central characters represents a point of experience along the training continuum from neophyte to battle-hardened veteran as they wrestle with the conflict between revered tradition and mandated change. While the events depicted in the book are fictionalized, the lengths to which Webb’s characters go to resist change is validated by the research of Lovell (1979) and Forney (2004). Through his characters, Webb gives voice to his conviction that the Academy has lost the discipline and character that made it special. This is the same argument Webb (1979) advanced in his article decrying women at the Academy two years earlier, and seeing its roots fully fleshed out here gives a glimpse into how deeply the aversion to any tradition-threatening change runs through the Academy and its alumni.

Section Two Conclusions

As evidenced by this brief look at previous structural and cultural changes at USNA, many similarities can be drawn between how these challenges ran their course and the road through change travelled by the class of 1980. Understanding how resistance to these changes played out (and was eventually resolved) can aid in the analysis of the resistance the first female midshipmen received from classmates, upper-class midshipmen, the administration, and alumni.

Section Three: Gender Integration Efforts at the Other Service Academies

Taking a step back, the Naval Academy was only one of the three federal service academies affected by Public Law 94-106. Both the U.S. Military Academy (USMA) at West Point and the U.S. Air Force Academy (USAFA) in Colorado Springs admitted women in the summer of 1976. And although there are many similarities between the three academies, there are also significant differences in both culture and tradition that affected their approach to gender integration. In this section I look at research on the first classes of women to enter West Point and the Air Force Academy.
Gender Integration at West Point

West Point is the oldest of the service academies, established in 1802 to train career officers for the U.S. Army. More books have been written about West Point than either Annapolis or the Air Force Academy, and that includes books by and about its female graduates. For the purposes of this study, one of the most important books is *In the Men’s House* by Carol Barkalow (1992). Barkalow was a member of the class of 1980 at West Point, and in her book, she described firsthand her experiences as a member of that inaugural class. Unlike Disher’s 1998 book, Barkalow did not fictionalize her account nor create composite characters. She also interviewed several of her female classmates and wove their experiences into her narrative. Additionally, she described in detail the challenges she continued to face at her first two duty stations after graduation. This provides a continuity of perspective and experience missing from the books written by Naval Academy alumnae and points towards needed research about USNA’s graduates. But even Barkalow’s book is incomplete and fails to capture the final 8 years of her career, when her influence as a more senior officer would have been even greater.

Two other important books about USMA alumnae are *Tough as Nails* by Gail O’Sullivan Dwyer (2009) and *Porcelain on Steel* by Donna McAleer (2010). Like Barkalow, Dwyer provides a non-fictionalized, first-person account of her time at West Point, and since she graduated with the class of 1981, her book provides a fascinating look at the differences between the felt experiences of the first and second classes with women. However, unlike Barkalow Dwyer limits her story to her own experiences and does not discuss her life beyond graduation. McAleer (2010), on the other hand, provides a much wider perspective on the changing experiences of successive classes of USMA alumnae. Her book is a compilation describing the Academy experiences and subsequent careers of 14 women graduates starting with the class of
1980 and continuing through the class of 2007. As a USMA graduate herself, McAleer has a keen understanding of the West Point experience, but the sheer breadth of her book limits the level of detail she can provide about any one of the alumnae she interviewed.

Like the academic research done at the Naval Academy, West Point also conducted attitudinal studies on male and female cadets in the class of 1980 and on the cadets in the all-male upper classes. Priest et al. (1978) conducted research similar to Durning (1978) and hypothesized that “cadets would become more liberal and equalitarian as they were exposed to the progress of women cadets at West Point” (Priest et al., 1978, p. 207). However, like Durning, they too found “contrary to what was predicted…attitudes toward women have not become more favorable among male cadets during the first year of coeducation at West Point” (Priest et al., 1978, p. 222).

One common reason cited for why women were not accepted was their inability to match the men in physical prowess. Adams reported many male cadets felt “that if women could not run, they could not lead” (Adams, 1984, p. 539), and Curtis noted women were “judged not on combat and military skill and potential but rather on physical capabilities and attributes” (Curtis, 2013, p. v). This research aligned with concerns some male Naval Academy midshipmen from the class of 1980 had about the women’s physical fitness requirements. These male midshipmen resented the fact that “the physical standards were lowered” for the women and felt these different standards were evidence of preferential treatment (M. Ferguson, personal communication, November 20, 2020).

A final singular and fascinating window into the challenges faced by the first co-ed class at USMA is provided by a fictional account, the 1979 CBS movie of the week “Women at West Point” (Marcus & Marcus, 1979). Although fictionalized and sanitized to be family-friendly for
prime time, this production is unique because it was filmed on location at West Point while the first class of women was still in attendance. Following army and network protocols, all elements of the script were cleared by both the Military Academy and the television network. But even with this level of censorship, the film does not shy away from depicting the numerous difficulties encountered by the women such as harassment, overstrict punishment, excessive attention from the press, and romantic overtures from upperclassmen. Seeing these integration challenges dramatized on location in period specific settings brings them to life in ways that resonate with the described experiences of Naval Academy alumnae from 1980, making this film a valuable addition to the literature despite its status as a work of fiction.

**Gender Integration at the Air Force Academy**

The USAFA is the youngest of the three service academies, having been founded in 1954 (only 7 years after the founding of the U.S. Air Force as a separate military service). It is also the service Academy with the least amount of published research documenting its gender integration efforts. The most comprehensive study of those integration efforts is Judith Stiehm’s 1981 book *Bring Me Men & Women: Mandated Change at the U.S. Air Force Academy*.

In her book, Stiehm provides significant detail on how USAFA prepared for and then managed the arrival of women. For instance, one significant difference between USAFA and both West Point and Annapolis is that the Air Force Academy did not initially house the women in the same dormitories as the male cadets. The women were all housed together in a separate dormitory along with a cadre of recently commissioned female Air Force officers whose function was to serve as mentors and role models. Although USAFA moved away from this model after the first semester and established gender-integrated dormitories like USNA and USMA, that
initial experience of being housed together allowed the USAFA women in the class of 1980 to form a close-knit support network which eluded the women at the other academies.

Another significant feature of Stiehm’s book (1981) is that she spends an entire chapter describing the different attitudes of the administrations at the other service academies regarding gender integration, and the ways in which the integration plans at USAFA differed from those employed at the other academies. However, a key limitation of her book was self-imposed by the author. She chose not to interview any of the female cadets at USAFA. The women were described “only as the institution perceived them” (Stiehm, 1981, p. 4). Her stated goal was to describe “an institution undergoing mandated change,” not to study the experiences of the women subjected to that change (Stiehm, 1981, p. 4).

In other literature, Campbell and D’Amico (1999) noted that men entering USAFA during the first years of integration were more traditional than their civilian counterparts. However, the women in those first classes were nontraditional because of their desire to “participate and excel in a ‘man’s world’” (Campbell & D’Amico, 1999, p. 74). In Campbell and D’Amico’s estimation, this mixing of traditional men and nontraditional women made the initial gender integration efforts more difficult. Smith and Luedtke (2005) went further in their examination of the “warrior culture” at USAFA and noted that “the masculine warrior paradigm is embedded in the structures, practices, and processes that define military academies” (p. 387). This paradigm, they concluded, must be changed before women could ever be fully accepted into USAFA’s culture.

Section Three Conclusions

The literature on gender integration at USMA and USAFA provides valuable framing for the experiences of the Naval Academy’s first women graduates. Analyzing the different
approaches by the different services allows comparison of the successes and failures of each Academy’s initial gender integration efforts. However, beyond the more recent first-person works of Dwyer (2009) and McAleer (2010) much of the research done on the first co-ed class at West Point is dated. As noted by Janda (1998) over 20 years ago, “Some of the first women graduates of the Academy are still in the Army, for example, so assessing with finality what their admission really meant for themselves or the institution is problematic at this point” (Janda, 1998, p. xiv). This lack of data about the lives of USMA and USAFA alumnae beyond the first few years of their military service parallels the lack of more longitudinal data on the USNA class of 1980 and points to the need for more research.

Section Four: Women in the Armed Forces

The admission of women to the federal service academies is obviously just one chapter in the far larger story of women in the armed forces. As Godson (2015) pointed out “Even before there was a U.S. Navy, women had helped gain the country’s independence during the American Revolution” (p. 3). Yet, despite the significant contributions made by women in the military throughout our country’s history, following World War II, Congress passed legislation which placed strict limits on the number of women who could serve. This legislation also said that women could not be promoted to the rank of general, hold command, or serve in aircraft or onboard ships engaged in combat missions (Harrell & Miller, 1997). It wasn’t until 1967 that many of these restrictions were eased, and not until 1972 were women finally allowed into the Reserve Officer’s Training Corps (ROTC; Hosek, et al., 2001). The restrictions on women serving in combat, however, didn’t begin changing until 1993, well after women had been admitted to the service academies. Indeed, this combat prohibition was the most frequently cited
reason for why women did not belong at the service academies, which many felt existed primarily to train combat leaders (Norton, 2015).

The resistance to women serving in combat is at the center of much of the research on women in the military, and understanding this research is at least one key to understanding the resistance felt by the first women at the Naval Academy. Goldstein (2018) looks at this issue head on in her analysis of the “persistent cultural and gender resistances to women in combat” (p. 386). She concludes that the combat exclusion “is about fragile masculinity and links to power” (Goldstein, 2018, p. 388). Barrett (1996) looks specifically at masculinity in the U.S. Navy in his attempt to discover “how definitions of masculinity emerge” (p. 129). His study proceeds from the assumption that, “gender is an actively constructed social accomplishment” (p. 129) and reaches the conclusion that “the achievement of masculinity in this culture is never secure. It must be continually confirmed and exhibited” (p. 141). Crowley & Sandhoff (2017) tie masculinity and combat together with their observation that “the most masculine space is combat” as they probe “how women soldiers negotiate identity” (p. 222). One of their findings showed that the sexual harassment experienced by some women in combat situations “communicated that they were not fully accepted” (Crowley & Sandhoff, 2017, p. 221).

How the military negotiates the physical differences between men and women is another commonly studied subject area. One traditional school of thought maintains that the mere existence of female soldiers “inevitably means weakening of a nation’s strength” (DeGroot, 2001, p. 23). This point of view is “based on arguments that women are physically and mentally fragile” (Goldstein, 2018, p. 386). And research into attitudes about how the physical capabilities of women are measured shows that many servicemen view the existence of different physical standards as “special treatment for women” (Cohn, 2000, p. 131). These attitudes about women’s
presumptive inability to perform the physical tasks required by the military persist despite research commissioned by the government which shows that “neither gender issues nor the presence of women…is perceived to have a significant impact on readiness (Harrell & Miller, 1997, p. 34).

Another line of research on women in the military studies the adaptations female soldiers make to survive and function in a male-dominated culture. In their research, D’Amico and Weinstein (1999) talked about “gendering” in which women must decide to either be “one of the guys” or “one of the girls” or attempt a “gender-neutral professionalism” (p. 5). In a study of gender integrated military units, Moskos (1985) found that “over time the women came to be regarded and evaluated as individuals” which led to their greater acceptance (p. 32). And of particular relevance when looking at the experiences of female service Academy graduates (who go on to become officers), Moskos found significant differences between the attitudes of female officers and female enlisted service members. “Female officers tended to de-emphasize physiological and emotional differences between men and women” on the assumption that “recognition of gender differences would result in female military careers being even more constrained” (Moskos, 1985, p. 33). Also of relevance to women at the service academies, Silva (2008) found that female ROTC cadets tended to redefine “their conception of femininity in order to engage in activities typically labelled non-feminine” (p. 955).

Section 4 Conclusions

This look at research done on women in the armed forces is admittedly very limited, but it shows that the issues and obstacles which confronted the class of 1980 at the Naval Academy continue to exist and continue to be studied. One important limitation of all the research cited in this section is that it was conducted years after the class of 1980 graduated and moved on to the
duty assignments that would define their careers. Much of the language and theoretical constructs underpinning this research were still in their infancy when the women of 1980 were trying to make sense of and better cope with their environment. Consequently, the specific experiences of members of that first co-ed class have not been closely examined with the illumination this research could provide. Bringing this research to bear on their unique and ground-breaking history could better illuminate their experiences and light the way for more successful future integration efforts.

**Section Five: Women in Business**

The body of literature on women in business is even more extensive than the literature studying women in the armed forces. Much of the theory contained in this business-related literature provides useful framing when trying to understand the gender integration efforts at the Naval Academy. To keep this review manageable, I will focus on two specific frameworks within the general business literature: (a) organizational change management and (b) gender integration.

There is a great deal of research on how organizations plan and execute change, however, much of this literature concerns the private sector and concentrates on actions taken by senior leaders (e.g., CEOs) to increase a corporation’s bottom line (e.g., Burke, 2002; Kotter, 2011). Though this research has useful implications for crafting a vision and building momentum for change, approaches which concentrate their efforts on maximizing profitability are not directly applicable to the gender integration efforts at USNA.

The decision to admit women was a government directive and the Academy was given no choice but to succeed, regardless of any cultural and/or bureaucratic obstacles. As such, some of the change strategies most applicable to this review are ones that focus on incremental change
efforts driven from the bottom up. Correll’s (2017) work on small wins and Meyerson’s (2011) concept of tempered radicals are prime examples of such bottom-up change. Small wins are modest, but achievable goals leaders can use to maintain the momentum of change and boost morale (Correll, 2017). Tempered radicals, on the other hand, are informal leaders who manage to “rock the boat without falling out of it” (Meyerson, 2011, p. 59). These radicals employ several subtle techniques to gradually disrupt prevailing counterproductive attitudes. Change strategies like these are useful in framing both the efforts of Academy officials and the actions taken by the women of 1980 as each wrestled with making the gender integration effort a success.

Research on gender integration intersects that on change management when exploring the challenge of how women navigate traditionally male-dominated organizations. The obstacles faced by women leaders in the private sector are directly analogous to those faced by the women at USNA. In particular, Jamieson (1995) discussed the double bind which confronts women leaders trying to reconcile the expectations of being a leader with those of being a woman. The female midshipmen had to reconcile similar conflicting roles as they sought to balance being a woman with being a midshipman. Zheng et al. (2018) in their article on gendered norms in leadership expanded upon the challenges of the double bind. They discussed 4 paradoxes “all stemming from the need to be both tough and nice” and suggested 5 strategies to navigate those paradoxes (Zheng et al., 2018, p. 28). Those coping strategies, which included looking for win-win solutions and reframing what being both tough and nice look like, are seen in the ways the women of 1980 managed the leadership positions they held as they moved through the ranks first at USNA and later in their naval careers.
Kanter’s (1977) research on corporate power, politics, and gender relations is particularly relevant to this review because it captured and reflected the social attitudes and norms that were prevalent in the years leading up to and during the time the class of 1980 was at the Naval Academy. Kanter described underrepresented individuals as tokens who are subject to heightened visibility, polarization, and assimilation pressures (Kanter, 1977). This concept captured the experiences of the first women at the Naval Academy particularly well and has been used as framing theory in both the earliest studies on the class of 1980 (Durning, 1978) and in more recent studies (Lewis, 2005).

Section Five Conclusions

This representative sample of business-related theories about change management and gender integration provides more possible frameworks for interpreting the actions and experiences of the first female midshipmen at USNA. But these studies all have one important limitation which must be considered before using them to frame or explain actions and attitudes at the Naval Academy. USNA is a military organization, governed by regulations and influenced by centuries of martial traditions. These regulations and traditions combine to create unique behavioral pressures that are not present in the businesses and organizations studied in the literature this section reviewed.

A Larger Framing Theory and Final Thoughts about the Literature

Up to this point, I have looked at collections of research and theories which could be applied specifically to the experiences of the Naval Academy’s first gender-integrated class. But as mentioned in the last section, the Academy is a unique organization with a culture heavily influenced by regulation and tradition. Understanding the culture of the Naval Academy is one
key to understanding the experiences of the men and women in the ground-breaking class of 1980.

There is significant research on organizations as self-sustaining, change-resistant cultures (Morgan, 2006). Specifically, Schein (1985) described organizational culture as operating at three levels: a surface level of visible artifacts; a deeper level of espoused beliefs; and an unconscious level of basic assumptions. This deeper level of basic assumptions is “taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel” (Schein, 1985, p. 9). Having a clear understanding of these unconscious basic assumptions as taught to the class of 1980 upon arrival provides a more complete picture of the inherent challenges to gender integration buried in the Academy culture of the mid-70’s.

In this literature review, I have examined both research done specifically about the Naval Academy’s class of 1980, and broader research which sheds light on the larger issue of gender integration. The literature reviewed here supports my qualitative research into the specific gender integration challenges experienced by members of the Naval Academy’s first co-ed class. My study examined those challenges and how they subsequently affected the lives of my classmates. Understanding the personal and highly individual experiences of those who took part in this pioneering gender integration effort is relevant to anyone looking to achieve greater levels of diversity, equity, and inclusion.
CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY & DESIGN

Preamble

Before I describe the specific design of my study, it is important for me to discuss the form of my dissertation. In 1896, architect Louis Sullivan coined the phrase “form ever follows function” (p. 408). Applying this maxim to my proposed research, the function of my study is to explore the felt experiences of members of USNA’s class of 1980 related to gender integration. The best form to conduct and present this research is that which best uses my own particular skills as a researcher and communicator. I am an independent filmmaker by trade with a Master of Fine Arts in film production. I think and often communicate in moving images and sound. Given this skillset and inclination, I have created an atypical dissertation which incorporates the findings in the form of a video documentary.

The idea of using an artform (in this case documentary filmmaking) to both conduct and present research in the social sciences is not new. Eisner (2008) argued that art can be considered a form of knowledge and maintained that “art is present in research when its presence enables one to participate vicariously in a situation” (p. 7). Indeed, such vicarious participation for the viewer has been one of my goals in studying the felt experiences of my classmates. Shrum and Scott (2017) have elaborated on video methods to capture just such experiences and regard videography as “the most significant new set of techniques in 21st century social analysis” (p. xiii). And looking specifically at the documentary format, Fitzgerald and Lowe (2020) have reconceptualized documentary filmmaking “as a research process” (p. 1), while Luttrell and Clark (2018) have explored how the documentary editing technique of montage can “create new ways of seeing and knowing” (p. 775). The goal of my study has been
to allow the gender integration experience at USNA to be seen and known in just such a new way. I hope the documentary dissertation I have created accomplishes that goal.

Full Disclosure: I started conducting interviews with my classmates in 2019 (all with formal IRB approval) and continued to conduct interviews through 2023. The methodology used in this study has been informed by both theory and by my experiences conducting these interviews. In areas where my methodology diverges from that prescribed by theory, I will describe how and why my process for conducting and analyzing interviews differed from textbook methodology. I will mark these sections of the study as “Full Disclosure.”

**A Case Study/Narrative Analysis Design**

For this study, I employed a qualitative case study/narrative analysis design. I conducted qualitative interviews with graduates from the USNA class of 1980 (and others with knowledge of their experience) and treated each graduate interviewed as a case. I also supplemented these interviews with existing documentation and primary sources that reported on my classmates’ time at the Academy and their experiences in the years following graduation. I conducted each interview in person and on camera to obtain video data for inclusion in my dissertation documentary. After constructing the cases, I attempted to synthesize a story which provides compelling insights into the felt experiences of the class of 1980 as a whole.

I chose the case study/narrative analysis design because I am interested in making sense of how the gender integration process at USNA impacted the lives of my classmates as revealed through the individual stories they tell of their life experiences. The case study strategy allowed me to view each graduate individually and capture the specifics of their experiences in deep, idiosyncratic detail. Using narrative analysis like that described by Polkinghorne (1995), I then
used those cases as data elements in the construction of the larger story (and more complex case) of the class of 1980’s experience with gender integration.

**Research Sites and Participants**

The primary participants for this study were the men and women of the Naval Academy’s class of 1980. Within that group, I spent more time and effort interviewing my female classmates, since they were the minority population in this gender integration effort. I conducted several cycles of interviews, with each cycle informing all subsequent cycles. For example, the first cycle (which began with my initial pilot study) consisted of participants who were personally known to me. This is consistent with a convenience sample methodology (Glesne, 2016) with *convenience* referring here to people with whom I had pre-existing personal relationships.

The information gathered during each cycle of interviews pointed towards both people and events beyond my own personal knowledge (this dynamic was evident even in the pilot studies). This information shaped the subsequent cycles of interviews. These subsequent cycles consisted of both people known to me and classmates I did not know at school, but who were referred to me in previous interviews. These later cycles of interviews, in other words, introduced the strategy of snowball sampling (Glesne, 2016) into the methodology for selecting participants.

On occasion, interviews pointed me towards someone outside the USNA class of 1980 who could provide valuable context and perspective to the stories of my classmates. Individuals so referenced were family members, students who attended the Academy in classes preceding the class of 1980, and members of the faculty and staff at the Academy while our class was in attendance. I interviewed several of these individuals as well.
I continued to conduct interview cycles (both with classmates and those referred by classmates) until the individual stories painted a clear, multidimensional, and nuanced picture of the experience of the class of 1980 with regards to gender integration. This was the point Patton (2015) called saturation and, from my perspective as a documentary filmmaker, was the point where I could present the story as accurately and completely as possible.

A key factor which limited the participants I could use for this study was my desire to conduct on-camera interviews. Interviewing subjects on-camera meant we both had to be physically present in the same location, which in practical terms meant I had to travel to where they were. While the possibility of telephonic or virtual interviews existed, I avoided them for two reasons: First, in my experience, a real and tangible connection is created when you sit down across the table from someone. That connection is never as strong virtually. Second, one requirement for telling stories visually is having compelling visual content. Although Zoom and other teleconferencing platforms provide an image of the speaker, the acuity of that image is subject to the vagaries of bandwidth and is often missing the subtle visual cues that give the viewer insight into the inner life of the participant. Thus, my desire to make a documentary created additional scheduling challenges and imposed the necessity of significant travel. (The Naval Academy, by law, selects its students from all states and territories, which means that my classmates are widely scattered geographically.)

Full Disclosure: In reality, the cycles I experienced were not as tidy and self-contained as described here. For instance, interviews with the first cycle of classmates (those known to me personally at school) continued throughout the entire process because of the scheduling challenges described above. However, my completed first-cycle interviews yielded second cycle
names which I began to interview whenever possible. So in actuality, the cycles were more co-
incident than sequential.

Data Collection Procedures

Conversational/Guided Interviews

As described above, the primary data collection method for this study was qualitative interviews conducted on-camera. In his book *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods*, Patton (2015) described interview strategies that range from informal conversations that rely “entirely on the spontaneous generation of questions” (p. 437) to standardized open-ended interviews in which “the exact wording and sequence of questions are determined in advance” (p. 438). In between the two, he described the use of an interview guide, which specifies in advance what topics and issues will be covered but leaves the interviewer free to spontaneously compose appropriate questions (Patton, 2015).

In my interviews, I primarily used a conversational approach during which each person interviewed related events and memories as they occurred naturally during our conversation. However, I also created a list of topics which might arise during the conversation. (That list of topics is attached as appendix A.) As I conducted interviews, I kept those topics in mind, and guided the interview towards those topics if they seemed relevant in the moment. While I did not think it necessary for each interview to cover the exact same ground, there needed to be a commonality in the types of events and experiences each participant related. The list of topics assisted in creating that commonality. However, the list did not remain static. I revisited and revised the list as issues and themes emerged during interviews to ensure the greater story of the class as a whole was being adequately captured.
In total, I conducted 48 interviews and traveled to 16 states (and the District of Columbia). Twenty of the interviews were with female classmates from the class of 1980 and 15 of the interviews were with male classmates. I interviewed seven alumni from other classes (including one daughter of a female classmate), two former faculty from USNA, and one historian. The remaining three interviews were group interviews involving two or more participants (each of whom had also been interviewed singly). The average length of an interview was 83 minutes, with the shortest being 36 minutes and the longest being 152 minutes. Transcriptions of each interview were created automatically by my video editing software and those transcripts assisted in initial themetic analysis.

The subjects in 35 of the interviews appear in the documentary. The other 13 subjects related experiences that confirmed and supported stories I had heard previously and aided in triangulating the accounts of my classmates and confirming that I had reached saturation.

**Document Collection**

In addition to the interviews, I gathered data from books and articles written by classmates; oral histories; and news stories and editorials written about the gender integration process at USNA both before and after the class of 1980 graduated. These documents (which are referenced in the literature review chapter) provided important period-specific framing and background information on the experiences related in the interviews.

**Data Analysis**

In his article *Narrative configuration in qualitative analysis*, Polkinghorne (1995) talks of *narrative analysis* as a process which involves synthesizing data “rather than a separation of it into its constituent parts” (p. 15). The goal of such analysis is to create a story in “an attempt to understand individual persons” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 16). He goes on to describe how
narrative analysis can be used to create a set of case studies related to the same topic. These case studies (which he also calls “profiles or vignettes”), when viewed alongside each other, “provide greater insight and understanding of the topic than any single vignette” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 21). This is the analysis approach I used for my study.

In short, I constructed individual case studies through a narrative analysis approach. Consistent with Polkinghorne’s definition of narrative analysis, these cases took the form of stories. And while each story was unique, there were also certain commonalities based on the similarity of challenges faced by each graduate. I used each subject’s unique responses to those common challenges to structure the individual stories.

After the story of each case was constructed, I used those stories to generate a larger story analogous to what Polkinghorne calls a commentary chapter. Polkinghorne describes a commentary chapter as follows: “Often, a set of case studies is followed by a commentary chapter in which the differences and similarities among the cases is highlighted” (Polkinghorne, 1995, p. 21). While following the intent of a commentary chapter in my construction of the larger story, my output was in a documentary format which allowed individual (and sometimes conflicting) cases to be experienced more-or-less simultaneously by the viewer.

It is important to note that in creating a documentary dissertation, I sailed through uncharted (or at least minimally charted) waters. There is a generally accepted format for dissertations. There are likewise generally accepted formats for various types of documentaries. However, there is no existing methodological handbook outlining the steps and requirements for creating a documentary dissertation. To be sure, there are guidelines for collecting and analyzing video data in different contexts (e.g., Green, 2007), but I have found no real guidance for researching and reporting a dissertation in documentary format in the social sciences.
Accordingly, I borrowed techniques and approaches from both written analysis techniques (e.g., Polkinghorne, 1995; Glesne, 2016) and techniques more tailored towards video (e.g., Fitzgerald & Lowe, 2020). At each point in the process, I used one simple question to guide my decision making: Will this choice enable me to tell the story more completely and accurately?

Full Disclosure: Although I have described Polkinghorne’s narrative analysis in some detail, I also employed other types of analysis. In addition to narrative analysis of individual cases, I also at times treated all the male members of my class as a single case (and all the female members as a complementary case). In analyzing and presenting these larger cases, I found thematic analysis (Glesne, 2016) to be particularly useful. Therefore, my final method of analysis is a hybrid of techniques which allowed the most thorough and compelling exploration of the felt experiences of my classmates.

Limitations and Significance of the Study

Limitations of the Study

The potential pitfalls and limitations of this study are many. My own positionality as a member of the class of 1980 was a key limitation. The same familiarity with the subject that gave me ready access to my classmates and their experiences also had the potential to color the themes I was able (or willing) to see. However, my positionality was also a strength. As an alumnus, I had first-hand knowledge of the school’s unique environment and culture. And being a classmate created a common bond and degree of trust with other classmates that would be hard to achieve otherwise. It also gave me easy access to records at both the Naval Academy and its Alumni Association.

Another significant limitation is that I studied events that happened over 40 years ago in a specific cultural context. It is not always easy to access your 19-year-old self with your 60-
something mind. Were my respondents able or willing to remember and relate what they thought and how they acted 40 years ago? How much of their personal history was rewritten in hindsight? One of the male midshipmen captured the tension between past and present perfectly. Referring to the women, he said “I’d like to think I didn’t resent them as individuals…I don’t know if I was successful with that.” Several of the women also spoke of not dwelling on the more difficult or disturbing memories, preferring instead to remember the more positive moments. Jill (Hawkins) Votaw described it this way: “There were good things that happened, there were bad things, but you try not to dwell on that…I…probably have repressed a lot of that” (personal communication April 5, 2019). Wherever possible, I’ve tried to mitigate the effects of time and memory, but even so, this remains a study constructed from incomplete fragments and colored by time and the reframing of traumatic experiences.

One way I mitigated these limitations was to triangulate the data from the interviews with each other and with existing written documentation. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), this approach for strengthening validity builds evidence for themes from several sources and several individuals (p. 212). I also used member checking (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) to ensure my interpretation of any individual’s story matched their intent in telling the story. Each member of the study that appeared on camera had the opportunity to review the first cut of the documentary and provide feedback with the goal of ensuring that I had understood and retold their stories accurately. On more than one occasion, I made changes to the final product based on their input.

Another limitation is worth mentioning. All the participants in this study self-selected to participate. An observation noted by some of my female classmates is that there are certain women in our class who have made a conscious decision to avoid all association with the Naval
Academy. Any and all attempts to reach out and connect with these alumnae have failed. Obviously, their opinions and experiences are missing from the study.

And one final limitation: While conducting the interviews, I noticed how my own reaction to certain subjects sometimes urged me to probe those topics more deeply (or conversely, to shy away from other topics). Peshkin (1988) talks about how a researcher’s own subjectivity has the potential to shape their research in the moment it is happening. To minimize the effects of these potential biases, Peshkin recommends that researchers maintain a keen awareness of how their subjectivity may be affecting them as data is being gathered. I attempted to maintain this level of self-awareness as I conducted the interviews. For instance, on those rare occasions when the conversation turned to sexual violence, I became uncomfortable and felt that as a male interviewer I was trespassing through very personal and private memories. In these instances, I never asked follow-up questions or tried to elicit more details. Consequently, any discussion of sexual violence is limited to those stories that were shared spontaneously without prompting.

**Significance of the Study**

This is, to be unapologetically metaphorical, the study of a residual wake caused by a passing ship over forty years ago. The ship is long gone, and those initially swept up in its bow wave have since been scattered to the seven seas. What is to be gained now, in tracing the trajectories of those the ship set in motion? There is historical significance, of course. The members of the Naval Academy class of 1980 lived through a singular event in history. However, that moment will never occur again in the same way. Even if I had interviewed every member of the class (as well as their families and co-workers), this would still be the story of
unique adaptation to unique circumstances by unique individuals. There is nothing in this tale with predictive generalizability for the future.

But being unique is not necessarily a bad thing. According to Donmoyer (1990), “uniqueness is an asset rather than a liability” (p. 194). The members of my class were outliers, and “the outlier is prized, for the outlier has great heuristic value” (Donmoyer, 1990, p. 194). In a time when there is a pressing need for social change on many fronts, the journey of the pioneers in the USNA class of 1980 provides a detail-rich example of initiating and following through on social change. Their example can serve to expand the cognitive structures of others surfing the bow waves of their own social change (Donmoyer, 1990, p. 195). It is my hope that this study can help guide the way for others attempting to integrate into less-than-welcoming environments.

Much like qualitative researchers swimming upstream against notions of scientific worth, the women in my class were fighting preconceptions of their worth in a hide-bound, tradition-rulled society. That society needed changing. But “tradition” in the Navy (and in society at large) dies hard. As noted by Donmoyer (1990) in a similar context, “Giving up sacrosanct notions is a slow and painful process” (p. 197). Just how slow and painful that process can be is part of this study. But I hope the story of USNA’s class of 1980 will provide proof that given time and persistence those notions can be changed. And if this unique example can give hope to others sailing against the currents opposing social change, that is significance enough.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The findings for this dissertation are presented in the form of a video documentary. The documentary can be viewed at the following link: www.petesphestdwebsite.com/videos
The purpose of this study has been to explore the felt experience of belonging to the Naval Academy’s first gender integrated class. My goal was to capture (and present) what it felt like to live through the gender integration process and document how that change was both resisted and supported. In particular, I explored the following questions:

1. As reflected in the experiences of my classmates, how did the unique culture at USNA affect the gender integration process?

2. What coping strategies were employed by members of my class to manage the difficulties of gender integration?

3. In what ways did the members of my class make sense of their experiences at USNA over time?

The second and third questions above are specifically addressed in the documentary, however the first question requires a little unpacking.

As seen in the documentary, initial indoctrination into the Academy occurs during plebe summer. A key feature of plebe summer is that only the plebes and a select cadre of senior midshipmen are involved. The rest of the student body is scattered across the globe conducting professional training on ships and naval bases. It is not until the end of plebe summer, when the brigade returns, that full immersion into the culture of the Naval Academy takes place. This line of demarcation when plebe summer ends and the entire student population returns is important because it was at this point that the women of 1980 became fully aware of the resistance their presence created. Here’s how Marge (Morley) Bachman described the difference after the brigade returned: “I thought plebe summer, the women were treated just like my male
classmates…but when the brigade came back, that’s when things really started to change” (personal communication, September 9, 2019).

There are several reasons why the women’s subjective experience of plebe summer (where they felt less discrimination and more acceptance) was markedly different from their experience during the academic year. First is the fact that the cadre of senior midshipmen conducting plebe summer training were hand-picked for their professionalism and record of performance. Second is that the rules and regulations that govern plebe summer are rigorously specific, and there was focused attention given to their enforcement by the administration. And third is that the larger set of culture and traditions which govern daily life at the Academy did not fully come into play until the brigade returned. It is this larger culture which most adversely affected gender integration.

**Framing the Culture**

The unique culture of the Academy is woven through every experience related by my classmates. To understand the specific demands of that culture (and the consequences for non-compliance with those demands) I’m going to frame the Academy’s culture with theory from Edgar Schein’s (1985) book “Organizational Culture and Leadership.” Schein theorizes that culture can be analyzed at three different levels from “tangible overt manifestations that you can see and feel” (Schein, 1985, p. 17) to deeply embedded, unconscious assumptions which he defines as “the essence of culture, or its DNA” (Schein, 1985, p. 12). In between the visible artifacts and the underlying assumptions are the espoused beliefs and values, which are the stated rules governing how the members of a specific culture are expected to behave. In this section, I will discuss how requirements imposed on the behavior of midshipmen by each of
Schein’s three levels of culture presented obstacles that made the women’s integration into that culture more difficult.

**Level One: Visible Artifacts**

The first of Schein’s three levels of culture is visible artifacts. These are the easily identifiable, outwardly visible manifestations of any specific culture. At the Naval Academy, everywhere you look there are artifacts of the school’s mission and history. Monuments, memorials, exhibits of historic naval weaponry, and even the crypt of John Paul Jones are all on display. But perhaps the most striking visual artifact at USNA are the midshipmen themselves. They wear uniforms steeped in tradition and their collective, monolithic presence is a literal embodiment of the military values of precision, order, and uniformity. All of this is by careful design. The uniforms, for instance, are all custom tailored. And the pants to those uniforms don’t have front pockets. This is for two reasons. First, it keeps the lines of the uniform clean and uncluttered. Second, it makes standing with your hands in your pockets a physical impossibility. The carefully coordinated, trim and well-tailored appearance of each midshipman is a key visual artifact of the Academy’s culture.

The women’s uniforms, however, initially did not fit this masculine mold. As related by Barb Geraghty, there were problems with both styling and appearance: “There were things that were unique to being female, and one of them was the uniforms that we had. They were not fitted for women; they were men’s uniforms…they didn’t accommodate women’s hip sizes…so we didn’t look very military” (personal communication, September 9, 2019).

In addition to the challenges created by the women’s uniforms, the Academy also had problems with women’s hairstyles. Marge (Morley) Bachman tells a story of the difficulty an unflattering haircut caused and adds, “there were other young ladies in our class getting these
botched haircuts. And they [the Academy] realized ‘you know, I think we need more than a barber trained in men’s hair [styles]’” (personal communication, September 9, 2019).

Adjusting the fit of the uniforms and learning to accommodate women’s hairstyles were relatively easy fixes. But a bigger challenge to the physical appearance of the women was posed by the food served at the Academy. Meals were served three times a day to all 4500 midshipmen at once in the Academy’s 55,000 square foot dining hall. At those meals, enough food was served for each midshipman to consume almost 4000 calories a day. Initially, no accommodation was made for the women, and as a result, many of them gained weight. Sharon (Hanley) Disher relates how this led to a perception that all the women (including the cheerleaders) were overweight. “We used to have a cheer ‘A-B-U-S-E, abuse, abuse,’ and the brigade would yell back at us ‘O-B-E-S-E, obese, obese,’ because they always said we were fat” (personal communication, September 9, 2019).

The combination of ill-fitting uniforms, unflattering hairstyles, and an inappropriate diet all contributed to an appearance which did not mesh visually with the Academy’s previously all-male culture. The result was that the women (as judged by existing male standards) had difficulty looking professional and stood out instead of blending in.

**Level Two: Espoused Beliefs and Values**

The second of Schein’s cultural levels is espoused beliefs and values. One manifestation of these beliefs are the written rules, regulations, and standards which govern how a culture is run. The stated mission of the Academy in 1976 was to prepare midshipmen morally, mentally, and physically to be professional officers in the naval service. The attention given to physical development as an equal part of the triad of moral, mental, and physical development was not just lip service to a stated value. All midshipmen took a series of physical fitness tests every six
months which included (among other things) sit-ups, pull-ups, a timed mile run, and an obstacle course. And the grades received on these fitness tests affected a midshipman’s overall class standing, which in turn affected the opportunities available to them at graduation, since assignment to career fields was based on class rank.

Before women arrived at the Academy, the administration established what they judged to be gender appropriate female physical fitness standards. For example, a minute was added to the passing time for completing the mile run, and in place of pullups on the applied strength test, women had to complete the flexed arm hang. On the surface, the physical fitness standards (both male and female) belong to Schein’s second level of culture (espoused beliefs and values) since they reflect adherence to the Academy’s stated mission. However, it is possible the resistance expressed by some of the men bubbles up from Schein’s third level of basic underlying assumptions.

One of the assumptions behind having common standards is that those standards guarantee a completely level playing field. At a highly competitive institution like the Academy where all aspects of performance are constantly measured, an assumption of basic fairness is key. Having two groups of standards, for whatever reason, seemed to some of the men as unfair. As one male classmate said when discussing the fitness standards, “Don't say we're not changing the standards, as the leadership did, and then change the standards. ‘We're not changing anything,’ yeah, you changed a lot” (P. McGiffen, personal communication, November 4, 2020). Having different physical standards for the women prompted this individual to question whether the value of an Academy education had been reduced: “So, my thoughts were that this was going to devalue the diploma, the commission, the commission source of the Academy, because from where I was sitting, it did look like they were changing
the standards” (P. McGiffen, personal communication, November 4, 2020). These comments
allude to a feeling that the women were being held, not to an equitable standard, but to an easier
standard.

There is significant research supporting the position that some men in the military see
the existence of gender-appropriate standards as unfair. In her article “How can she claim equal
righ
ts when she doesn’t have to do as many push-ups as I do,” researcher Carol Cohn (2000)
asserts that “Having different physical training standards for men and women is seen as special
treatment for women (p.131).” Her reasoning is that prejudice based on differences in physical
prowess is logically defensible in the minds of these men and that such thinking is how they
“make sense to themselves of their own experiences and opinions” (p. 131). This is consistent
with the opinions of the male midshipmen. The perception that standards were being changed to
accommodate the integration effort gave these midshipmen footing for their belief that women
did not belong at the Naval Academy.

But arguably the most significant obstacle to gender integration which existed as written
guidance was the “combat restriction.” Title 10 of the US code stated, “women may not be
assigned to duty in aircraft that are engaged in combat missions nor can they be assigned to
duty on vessels of the Navy other than hospital ships or transports” (Women’s Armed Services
Integration Act, 1948). The Academy’s primary mission (as understood by both midshipmen
and the administration) was to train “line officers” which by definition were meant to serve in
the line of fire. By mandating the integration of the service academies without changing the law
that restricted women from serving in combat, Congress denied women access to the larger
naval culture that defined the very reason for the Academy’s existence.
Level Three: Basic Assumptions

Schein’s third level of culture deals with the deep-seated core beliefs upon which a culture is built. According to Schein (1985), these strongly held basic assumptions “determine behavior, perception, thought, and feeling (p. 18).” In many ways, this third level is the most insidious and presented the greatest number of challenges to the women of 1980. The Naval Academy of 1976 was a highly exclusionary institution that took pride in both how high its admission standards were and how difficult its course of study was. The expected attrition rate was roughly 33% as reflected in the instructions that were part of all 70’s-era induction ceremonies: “Take a look to your left and a look to your right. When you graduate, one of those individuals won’t be there.” (Full disclosure: When I graduated, neither of the individuals on either side of me were there). The pride of attendance engendered in midshipmen coupled with the fact that the student body had always been exclusively male gave the Academy culture we entered a very masculine, boy’s club mentality.

A basic assumption of that boy’s club was that women did not belong in the club, no matter what the law (or the administration) said. Messages supporting that assumption surfaced again and again in the Naval Academy’s idiosyncratic popular culture which was used to express and reinforce culturally acceptable behavior. One of the most visible and tangible expressions of that pop culture was the midshipman-produced satire magazine, the LOG. Through cartoons and articles, the LOG poked fun at the often-absurd contradictions inherent in life at the Academy. As classmate Joe Grace described it, “It was written by the mids [sic] for the mids [sic]…it made fun of the company officers, it made fun of the companies, it made fun of the women, it made fun of the men” (personal communication, December 13, 2022).
A close examination of LOG magazines from the 1976-77 school year (the year the class of ‘80 were plebes) shows that reductive, stereotypical portrayals of women were pervasive in the popular culture at the Academy. A popular feature of the LOG were cartoons which often emulated and parodied contemporary comic books. When the academic year started in the fall of 1976, cartoon characters representing female midshipmen showed up in the pages of the LOG. The first to receive her own comic strip debuted in November and was named “Sally Straight.” Sally fed into a particular stereotype of the first-year females as wide-eyed innocents and was portrayed as a strait-laced idealist who could not understand why plebes were treated differently. In her first appearance, she stands before the setting sun and laments the cynicism of upper-class midshipmen: “This is my Academy! I love it here! I love what she stands for! And it hurts me when others work against what my Academy is doing to all of us and for all of us! (Vause, 1976, p.7).” The subtext here is that Sally is on the outside looking in and cannot understand the nuances of the Academy’s highly stratified, tradition-driven masculine culture.

The LOG diminished the women’s stature in other ways as well. It was soon common for the first-year women to be referred to as either plebettes or ploobs in stories and articles. And while the LOG did not coin these diminutives, by using them in print they legitimized those terms as acceptable ways to refer to the women.

In some ways, the LOG represents a unique manifestation of Schein’s three levels of culture in that it operates primarily at the first and third levels. It’s obviously a visual artifact of midshipman culture and expressed in its pages are many of the underlying assumptions which supported that culture. But the second level, which contains the bureaucratic implementation of the administration’s values, was often the subject of ridicule and a thinly veiled contempt.
One final point about the LOG: I personally do not believe the LOG went out of its way to undermine the gender integration efforts at the Academy. Indeed, according to classmate Jill (Hawkins) Votaw, the LOG actively recruited women for their staff: “They wanted a woman. They wanted to start incorporating women’s perspective in things. Amazing as that was” (personal communication, April 5, 2019). And there were also cartoons and articles which ridiculed the men and presented the women in a positive light. However, many times the LOG held a mirror up to the often-unsupportive attitudes present at the Academy. That mirror reflected and amplified those attitudes, many of which hindered the acceptance of women as equals.

But perhaps the most compelling evidence of the boy’s club mentality at the Academy was the “No Girls on Herndon” (NGOH) movement that sought to keep women from fully participating in the Herndon monument ceremony. At the time, I could not help but notice the similarity between NGOH and the “He-man Woman Hater’s Club” popularized by the Little Rascals. The Little Rascals, though, were fictional children, and their childish prejudice was played for laughs. NGOH was created in all seriousness by midshipmen, and it undermined the teamwork needed to scale the monument and replace the plebe cap, resulting in our class having one of the longest Herndon completion times on record.

Finally, I cannot leave this section on the challenges male culture created for the women of 1980 without talking about sexual assault and rape. In my study, one of my female classmates recounted an instance of sexual assault, and another told of the trauma she endured because of being raped. Up to this point, all the artifacts, values, and beliefs I’ve discussed (and the masculine culture they created) were unique to the Naval Academy and/or the military. But sexual assault transcends both the Academy and the military at large. Violence against women
was and remains an enduring societal problem. However, sexual assault perpetrated by midshipmen is especially disturbing. The Academy prides itself on developing naval officers of character who make honorable choices when faced with difficult decisions. The experiences of sexual assault and rape recounted by my classmates show that the Academy failed to develop sufficient character in certain male midshipmen.

**Theory Conclusion**

Mapping Schein’s levels of culture onto Naval Academy culture is not quite as neat and tidy as presented here. For instance, as discussed above, the LOG as an element of that culture operated on all three of Schein’s levels. Likewise, the combat restriction was discussed as a manifestation of level 2, but it rested firmly on a deep-seated feeling that women were to be protected from (rather than exposed to) danger. But Schein’s cultural theories do give us a way to analyze and understand some of the gender-integration pushback experienced by the class of 1980. And although there were attempts to modify visual artifacts (such as women’s uniforms and haircuts) and provide appropriate written guidance (such as physical fitness standards), basic underlying assumptions of the Academy’s culture kept those changes from fully succeeding. This aligns well with Schein’s (1985) theory which contends that basic assumptions are “extremely difficult to change (p. 22).” Change management theory suggests that truly transformative change takes a considerable length of time, often many years. It also points to the need for a compelling vision and constant, consistent messaging (Kotter, 2011). As demonstrated, there were inconsistencies in the Academy’s messaging and there was no clear and implementable vision provided by Congress. Indeed, had it not been for the tenacity of the women in the class of 1980 (and those in the classes immediately following), there is a good chance the integration effort could have failed outright.
Lessons Learned

Leaving behind Schein’s theories of organizational culture, the experiences of my classmates provide many examples of practices that supported the gender integration process and other practices that hindered it. In this section, I’ll take a brief look at practical lessons those recounted experiences provide about organizational change and integration of an “other” into an indifferent (and potentially hostile) culture.

Lesson 1: Lay the Proper Administrative Groundwork

When Public Law 94-106 was signed, requiring women be admitted to the three federal service academies with the class of 1980, women were still prohibited by law from serving in combat. This placed the women in an ill-defined limbo where they were being prepared for a career field they were prohibited from entering. Although this legal paradox existed through no fault of the women, they felt the brunt of the resentment expressed by many male midshipmen. Had the combat restriction been lifted coincident with the women’s arrival (or at the very least by the time they graduated), their integration into the Academy (and into the Navy upon graduation) would have been significantly easier. The lesson here is obvious: When preparing to execute any cultural or social change, remove all legal and administrative barriers which could hinder that change to the greatest extent possible.

Lesson 2: Details Matter

There will always be unanticipated obstacles and unintended consequences, but that does not relieve an organization from the necessity to conduct rigorous planning. The most common refrain heard in conjunction with the Academy’s preparation for the women’s arrival was, “Don’t treat them any differently.” While this may be an admirable guiding principle, it ignores several facts about the differences between men and women and led to insufficient
planning in many areas. For instance, the off-the-rack white works uniform women were initially issued was specifically designed to fit the male frame. There was no way this uniform could be worn on a female frame and not appear ill-fitting and unprofessional beside a male in the same uniform. Not only did this uniform place the women at a distinct disadvantage whenever their appearance was graded, it effectively neutered them and denied their femininity.

But perhaps the most egregious example of a detail that need more attention was the use of diplomas and commissioning documents at graduation which specifically referenced the male gender. While there is no evidence that this slight was intentional, it begs credulity to believe a military service that takes pride in perfecting the precision necessary to safely navigate a nuclear submarine beneath the polar icecaps could fail to check the gender of the diplomas being issued to the first-ever female graduates. This was not a minor detail, yet it clearly did not receive the level of attention and oversight it deserved. As related by my female classmates, this was a final insult on a day that should have been one of their greatest triumphs. As these examples illustrate, attention to details in an integration effort is essential to ensuring a level playing field and in signaling leadership commitment to that change.

**Lesson 3: Be Consistent and Relentless in your Messaging**

The example of the mis-gendered diplomas sent an unmistakable message to the women that they still were not welcome. This error was clearly the fault of the administration. But many of the women’s negative experiences originated within the brigade of midshipmen, and there were several instances when the administration failed to step in and take immediate corrective action when the brigade at large behaved inappropriately. The most glaring instance of this was at the Army-Navy pep rally during our youngster year when the cheerleaders were booed off the stage. As described by cheerleader Sharon (Disher) Hanley, the administration did
nothing: “They don't say anything, they don't stop the pep rally, they don't say, ‘Hey, shipmates, that's not how you treat your shipmates.’ It was just like, ‘Okay,’ a tacit approval of, ‘Yeah, I know, we don't think they should be here.’” (personal communication, September 9, 2019).

This incident was a textbook opportunity for the administration to send a message reinforcing their commitment to the integration effort while simultaneously correcting inappropriate behavior. This would have certainly put a damper on the pep rally, but by not immediately addressing the behavior in the moment, the senior officers in attendance actually reinforced the message that women did not belong at the Academy. It’s clear that the leadership presiding over any significant social change must take advantage of every opportunity to reaffirm their commitment to the success of that change.

Lesson 4: Leadership Buy-in is key

One of the principal negative messages the administration sent when they failed to correct the hostility at the pep rally was that the Academy’s leadership did not fully support the integration effort. On one level, this was understandable. The lawmakers in Congress demonstrated a similar lack of commitment to gender equality by failing to address the combat restriction. This lack of commitment trickled all the way down to underclass male midshipmen who felt comfortable enough to harass women in the class of ’80 even after the women had become upperclassmen.

But it’s important to acknowledge that resistance to the women’s presence was not universal. Each of my female classmates told stories of receiving much needed (and often unexpected) support from other midshipmen, faculty, and staff. Many times, this support gave them the strength they needed to get through trying circumstances. All of which underscores the importance of buy-in to the success of any endeavor. Wide-ranging support from up and down
the entire chain of command is crucial when attempting to implement any significant change (Kotter, 2011).

**Lesson 5: Learn From Similar Integration Experiences**

Women were not the first “other” to be integrated into the Naval Academy (or into the military at large). The first African American graduated in 1949 (Gelfand, 2006), and it took until 1975 (one year before the class of ‘80 arrived) for USNA to commission its 100th Black graduate (Bodner, 1999). And within the class of ‘80, there were fewer Black midshipmen than there were women.

The possibility that the integration experiences of female midshipmen could be similar to those of black midshipmen was not lost on the administration. Early research done on the class of ’80 relied on the contact hypothesis which postulated greater acceptance with increased contact. This hypothesis grew out of research done on platoons of racially integrated soldiers in World War II (Durning, 1978). While the experiences of my female classmates bore out this prediction on an individual level (meaning that some of the women felt accepted as individuals), this did not translate to the acceptance of women at large.

One possible explanation for this disparity is that there were not enough women in ’80 for most male midshipmen to have a chance to get to know them. Indeed, within the class of ’80, women were only assigned to 24 out of the 36 companies at the Academy. The amount of contact needed to facilitate a more successful integration could not be achieved. However, this restriction was beyond the ability of the Academy to remedy, since the number of women assigned to the class of ’80 was determined by the Department of the Navy. The gender integration process could have proceeded much more smoothly had all parties involved with
planning and executing that integration conducted a more nuanced examination of the lessons learned during the racial integration of the military.

**Lesson 6: Provide a Support Network**

One of the most surprising facts about Academy life I uncovered during my research was the existence of the informal “seventh battalion” created by black midshipmen at the Academy (in the official structure for USNA, the brigade of midshipmen was divided into only six battalions). I was not able to determine how long this unofficial social organization had existed or the extent to which the administration of the mid-70’s was aware of its presence, but its mere existence points to the importance of having a support network for any minority population. The women of ’80 did not have any such network, and indeed, most of my female classmates talk about how isolated they felt while at school. When she learned about the existence of the seventh battalion, Liz (Belzer) Rowe lamented the fact that an “eighth battalion” had not existed where the women could connect with and support one another (personal communication, November 6, 2021). A quick perusal of the Naval Academy’s current website shows no less than 20 different affinity groups (including NSBE) indicating the importance they currently assign to supporting diversity, equity, and inclusion with a robust collection of social organizations.

**Implications for Further Research**

As I reviewed the interviews for this study and coded and cut them into the documentary, I was repeatedly struck not by how much information I had amassed, but by how much more I wanted to know. Accordingly, there are several subject areas relating both to the class of 1980 and to the broader history of gender integration at the Naval Academy that I feel would benefit from further study.
A portion of each interview I conducted with my classmates (both male and female) focused on their naval career after graduation. As I reviewed their stories of time served in the Navy and Marine Corps, two facts became readily apparent: First, that this was its own subject area separate from the integration experience they had lived through at the Academy; and second, that being on the cutting edge of gender integration in the military had continued to shape the lives of both my male and female classmates throughout their time in the service (and beyond). For the women, they would go on to be pioneers in whichever field they entered. And the men who served long enough to become senior line officers would often be in command of ships and squadrons receiving their first female warfighters once the combat restriction was finally lifted. Much could be learned about the long-term arc of any integration effort by conducting an in-depth study following the class of 1980 through their naval careers and beyond (many of my classmates continue to be mentors in both the public and private sectors).

My study begins and ends with the class of 1980. But the gender integration effort at USNA was far from over when we threw our hats in the air and graduated. When Sharon (Hanley) Disher visited the Academy in 1992 she was severely disappointed at how little had changed in the 12 years since her graduation (personal communication, September 9, 2019). Eighteen years later, when Sharon’s daughter Alison entered USNA in 2006, Alison reported that many male students still told jokes which belittled the appearance of the female midshipmen (personal communication, March 6, 2023). These first-person snapshots (coupled with persistently reoccurring news stories of sexual harassment at the Academy) point to the need to look at how the gender integration effort continued to play out after the class of 1980 graduated. Which integration challenges were the most persistent? What was the change (if any) in the attitudes of male midshipmen after the combat restriction was lifted? Looking at
how these challenges were met (or continue to exist) could help provide a detailed roadmap for future integration efforts in similarly challenging environments.

Finally, one of the most obvious questions raised by this study concerns the present-day Naval Academy. What is the culture at USNA like today and to what degree are current female midshipmen accepted? Over the course of the five years it took to complete this study, I had the opportunity to visit the Academy several times. I spent a great deal of time observing and talking with current midshipmen and even studied their presence on social media. A great deal has changed for the better since I and my classmates were there. Yet despite these positive changes, I saw enough in my visits to recognize that women were still not considered complete equals. How much of this reflects society at large and how much is USNA specific? One way to examine this issue would be to ask the generational descendent of the question which guided this study: What is the felt experience of being a midshipman at the present-day Academy? I feel the microcosm of the Naval Academy still has much to teach us about the process of integrating a minority population into a majority culture.

Conclusions

The primary goal for this study has been to capture what it felt like for members of the Naval Academy class of 1980 to live through the gender integration process. Because of my background as a filmmaker, I borrowed heavily from the practices of documentary filmmaking to both explore and present the experiences of my classmates as they navigated that process. My aim from the beginning has been to construct a nuanced and detail-rich documentary as a case study of gender integration in a specific context.

For me, the true value of that documentary is not the number of theories it may illustrate, or the lessons I can extract from it. Its true value is how it impacts the people who see
it. My hope is that the documentary resonates with anyone who is (or has been) engaged in an integration struggle, either as a member of the integrating population or as someone facilitating the process. If I have done my job well, the documentary will offer unique and individual insights to each person who sees it. And even though I cannot predict what those insights may be, or the value they may have, I can hope that they make a difference.

However, one of the most important audiences for this study are the members of the Naval Academy class of 1980. After seeing the first cut of the documentary, one of my male classmates responded, “As a result of your project I now have a great deal of respect for our female classmates and a great deal of shame for myself and the institution that more wasn't done for them at the time” (S. Sullivan, personal communication, February 20, 2024). To the extent that I can broaden the perspectives of (and aid in any needed healing for) those who went through this process, this study will have succeeded.
References


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Women’s Armed Services Integration Act, 10 U.S.C. § 6015 (1948).

Appendix A

Bow Wave of Change Interview Guide

Tell me about your family and your background.
What influenced your decision to attend the Academy?
What do you remember about Induction Day?
Tell me about your roommates.
What memories stick out from plebe year summer and plebe year?
What was the hardest thing for you during the four years?
What was the most satisfying aspect of attending USNA?
What do you remember about the James Webb article?
What are some favorite recollections of your classmates?
What emotional support did you get from your classmates (male and/or female)?
What career field did you go into in the Navy?
What assignments did you have?
How long did you serve in the Navy?
What do you consider your greatest success in the Navy?
What have you done since leaving the Navy?
In what ways has being an Academy graduate impacted your life?
How have your feelings about the Academy changed over time?
How has your relationship with your classmates (both male and female) changed over time?
Did you (or would you) encourage your children to go to USNA (why or why not)?
What advice would you give to your 18-year-old self?
In what ways was the experience worth it (or not worth it)?
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Principal Investigator: Peter Shaner
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Study History

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Key Study Contacts

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