PART 2

Gender Neutrality
Gender-Neutral Physical Fitness Tests and the Integration of Women in Combat Arms Occupations
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Introduction
The Combat Exclusion Policy was repealed in 2013, which opened all occupations within the military—to include combat arms—to women.1 Since then, however, women have faced a number of barriers to integration into these previously closed positions in the U.S. military. Specifically, even as the military shifted toward gender-neutral physical fitness standards, long-standing social biases and physiological differences between men and women have contributed to contentions regarding the integration of women into combat arms specialties. Policymakers moved toward gender-neutral occupational standards as a more systematic way to determine who would be qualified to fill positions with physically demanding tasks.2 Where gender previously served as a proxy screener for physical ability in jobs, the Services were now faced with “the possible inclusion of larger numbers of personnel who could not meet the physical demands,” leading to the development of gender-neutral fitness standards.3 Arguably, a gender-neutral physical fitness assessment would allow the military to make “the best possible use of talents and capabilities of women who sought combat positions.”4

Societal expectations and biological differences that lead to varying physical abilities previously motivated the exclusion of women from combat arms branches and roles.5 Similarly, debates on the validity of integration of women into combat arms branches stem largely from the “band of brothers” myth, which is a “generally accepted and consistent set of narratives linked to all-male units, male bonding, cour-

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* The views expressed in this chapter are solely those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect the opinion of Marine Corps University, the U.S. Marine Corps, the U.S. Navy, the U.S. Army, U.S. Army War College, the U.S. Air Force, or the U.S. Government.

1 Notice to Congress of proposed changes in units, assignments, etc. to which female members may be assigned, 10 U.S.C. § 652 (2012).
3 Various documents published by the DOD, such as DOD Instruction 1300.28, In-Service Transition for Transgender Service Members (Washington, DC: Office of the Under Secretary of Defense, 1 October 2016) tend to conflate the terms sex and gender. While the DOD policy on transgender servicemembers continues to develop, clarification of these terms and their use is necessary for accurate understanding of this research. While sex refers to a person’s biological characteristics at birth, gender refers to a person’s self-identification as either male or female regardless of their sex. For the purposes of this paper, further references to gender describe an individual’s concept of themselves and their self-identification as either male or female. Hardison, Hosek, and Bird, A Review of Best Practice Methods, xii.
4 Ash Carter, “No Exceptions: The Decision to Open All Military Positions to Women,” BelferCenter.org, December 2018.
age under fire, and the protection of the nation,” as well as from the physiological differences between men and women. Because men tend to be faster and stronger than women, men are perceived as “natural warriors.” Generally, women have a lower VO2 max, weaker upper body strength, and less muscle mass.

Given these physiological and biological differences, women have struggled to compete with men in combat arms entry screening tests and, as a result, do not experience desired levels of quantitative integration. Although DOD has not provided a set quantitative goal for integration, former secretary of defense James N. Mattis asserted that “there are too few . . . stalwart young ladies . . . charging into this [combat occupations].” Especially in the Marine Corps, where women only comprise eight percent of the force and attrition rates for combat training are high, quantitative integration of women is low. The Commandant of the Marine Corps, General David H. Berger, recognized gender integration as an area of improvement and tasked his subordinates to seek out active-duty female officers to attend the Infantry Officer Course. As such, though gender-neutral physical tests have paved the way for women to participate in the armed forces in previously out of reach ways, there are still concerns about quantitative integration.

Notably, there are certain areas in which women’s performance surpasses that of men. Specifically, women generally have greater aerobic capacity and resistance to muscular fatigue, as well as faster recovery following exercise. Most military tests in their current form favor male physiological strengths (upper body strength and anaerobic capacity), resulting in lower women’s average scores for physical fitness tests. The military’s gradual transition to more gender-neutral standards has thus complicated the conversation around women’s service in certain military occupations as new gender-neutral standards favor larger and stronger men.

The physiological and biological differences between men and women also highlight that the current physical test standards compound the performance gap in

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8 VO2 max is defined as the maximum volume of oxygen the body can deliver to the working muscles per minute. The higher the VO2 max, the faster one can expect to run. Alexander Hutchison, “Lactate Threshold and VO2 Max Explained,” Active, accessed 5 November 2021.
11 Moore, “Women in Combat.”
12 Thomas S. Szayna et al., Considerations for Integrating Women into Closed Occupations in U.S. Special Operations Forces (Santa Monica, CA: Rand, 2015), 45.
13 Szayna et al., Considerations for Integrating Women in Closed Occupations in U.S. Special Operations Forces, 49.
14 Data gathered from 4th Infantry Division Army Combat Fitness Test scores, as described by male Army officer (anonymous), interview with author, 29 January 2021, hereafter 29 January Army officer interview.
gender. And though the military is moving toward more effective measurements of combat-related fitness, the extent to which the current fitness evaluations approximate combat tasks is questionable. As a result, physical standards remain a common way that women are excluded from fully participating in combat arms branches, even with the implementation of gender-neutral physical standards.

Moreover, it is unclear whether the quality of integration under existing gender-neutral physical standards is acceptable to policymakers and women themselves. The U.S. military today is faced with the issue of integrating more women into previously closed all-male occupations, so it is important to identify ways in which certain physical standards stifle the progress and effectiveness of female integration.

Accordingly, the research question examined in this chapter is: what effect has the adoption of gender-neutral physical standards had on the integration of women in combat arms units? To consider the question, this research also examines whether implementing gender-neutral standards affects these outcomes that are relevant to female integration. How are changes toward gender-neutral physical standards perceived by the force and how does this influence attitudes toward women in the military? This study sought to determine the ways in which physical standards affect women’s ability to integrate into previously closed combat arms branches within the military by assessing the perceptions of the effectiveness of a physical assessment standard on the inclusion and attitudes of units. It may be expected that the perception of a standard’s gender neutrality depends on whether that standard has been changed since the repeal of the combat exclusion policy in 2013, the organizational culture of a unit, and the type of gender neutrality one ascribes to. Possible types of gender neutrality could revolve around a single metric used to evaluate both genders or could be more focused on performance outcomes of soldiers conducting a physical fitness assessment.

Current literature on female integration into combat arms branches has not sufficiently considered the perception of physical standards on unit cohesion and attitudes toward women fulfilling combat roles traditionally filled by men. Although women now have access to combat arms occupations in the military, qualitative acceptance of women in these fields varies. Understanding the effect of gender-neutral physical standards on the inclusion, attitudes, and cohesion of servicemembers in combat units would help the military move toward a more effective talent assessment that gives equal opportunity to all soldiers.

My study examines the physical fitness assessments of the Army and the Marine Corps with a specific focus on the Army Ranger School Ranger Assessment Phase (RAP), the Marine Corps Infantry Officers Course (IOC), and the Army Combat Fitness Test (ACFT). RAP has not changed its physical assessment standards since the 1990s and consists of the Ranger Physical Fitness Test, two timed ruck marches, and several

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15 Moore, “Women in Combat.”
runs. On the other hand, the physical fitness requirements of the IOC changed in 2018, when the Combat Endurance Test (CET) no longer became a graduation requirement. Although little information on the specifics of the CET is available to the general public due to the secretive nature of the event, the test is known to involve several ruck marches under a heavy load (up to 120 pounds). The removal of the CET as a requirement to pass IOC generally coincided with the integration of women into the Marine Corps in 2016. As such, some interpreted the change in IOC physical testing standards as the military lowering standards in order to accommodate this integration. The ACFT—the Army’s newest fitness test—replaced the Army Physical Fitness Test (APFT) and evaluates more physical modalities, resulting in a general perception that it is a more comprehensive test of soldier fitness. Unlike the APFT, the ACFT has the same grade scale for women and men. However, the performance gap between sexes on the ACFT has caused concern from servicemembers and policymakers alike, who fear generally poor female performance on the ACFT “could damage some soldiers’ professional prospects.” This study distinguishes between two types of gender neutrality in relation to physical standards, and situates these definitions in the context of cohesion and attitudes toward women in combat arms.

**Literature Review**

**The Social Dimension**

To understand the effect of gender-neutral physical standards on cohesion, attitudes toward, and integration of women in combat arms, it is important to first understand factors that influence cohesion, attitudes, and inclusion. Scholars distinguish between social cohesion and task cohesion. Social cohesion requires the absence of latent social conflict (income inequality, racial or ethnic tensions, and other forms of polarization including gender inequality) and the presence of strong social bonds. Task cohesion is fostered when groups work together to accomplish a given task and a group identifies strongly with the mission of accomplishing this task.

Scholars generally study military or unit cohesion separately from social cohesion and task cohesion. In 1950, Leon Festinger, Kurt Back, and Stanley Schachter developed

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a new definition of group cohesion that has been used by many researchers since. They
defined group cohesion as “the desire of individuals to maintain their affiliation with a
group, and this drive is measured by influence and initiative, task competence, and
especially like-dislike.”24 The most commonly used definition of social cohesion focuses
narrowly on interpersonal attraction, but the definition of requirements for military
cohesion incorporates trust and social support built within groups.25 In other words,
military cohesion is centered around interpersonal bonds and the trust that often results
from task-related competencies, including perceived or actual physical fitness measured
by physical fitness assessments.26 Moreover, Edward Shils and Morris Janowitz found
that “community of experience” such as shared hardship breeds solidarity and thus
increases cohesion.27

The band of brothers myth reinforces the argument that the adoption of gender-
neutral physical standards and integration of women into combat specialties
undermines social cohesion. This myth revolves around three key assumptions
commonly internalized by warfighters. First, the myth casts male bonding and feelings
of “trust, pride, honor, and loyalty” between men as exceptional. Second, it holds
exclusively male bonding as an essential element of an orderly and civilized society.
Third, it maintains that “all male units are seen as elite as a result of their social bonds
and physical superiority.”28 This final assumption rests on the physiological differences
between men and women and emphasizes the presumed inability of men to view
women as anything other than objects of sexual attraction. Those who oppose female
participation in combat operations tend to draw on the presumption that integration
of women into such units would create insurmountable tensions and frictions. Those
who ascribe to this opinion believe “there is not a woman alive who could contribute
enough to one of [a commander’s] teams over the long haul to make up for what her
presence would do to the trust among his men.”29 The band of brothers myth therefore
provides the context in which soldiers may perceive a change in physical standards
(toward gender-neutral standards). Physical and mental abilities, accordingly, may
not represent the greatest obstacle for women’s integration in combat arms branches—
social and cultural issues stemming from the band of brothers myth and exacerbated
by in-group/out-group dynamics more accurately represent the obstacles women
have to face.

24 Xavier Fonseca, Stephan Lukosch, and Frances Brazier, “Social Cohesion Revisited: A New Definition
and How to Characterize It,” Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research 32, no. 2
25 Szayna et al., Considerations for Integrating Women into Closed Occupations in the U.S. Special
Forces, 79.
26 Szayna et al., Considerations for Integrating Women into Closed Occupations in the U.S. Special
Forces, 80.
27 Edward Shils and Morris Janowitz, “Cohesion and Disintegration in the Wehrmacht in World War II,”
28 Mackenzie, Beyond the Band of Brothers, 2–3.
or/10.1016/S0030-4387(00)00037-5.
Contrary to some opinions and the band of brothers myth, studies conducted within the armed forces of the United States demonstrate no negative effect on cohesion in mixed-gender units. Such conclusions may suggest that gender-neutral fitness tests will have little impact on cohesion. A Marine Corps study from 2015 as well as a study conducted by the General Accounting Office after the Persian Gulf War both found that gender was not a determinant or component of cohesion and that bonding in mixed-gender units was sometimes even better than unit cohesion in single-gender units. However, the narrative surrounding the Marine Corps study largely misinterpreted the conclusions, and thus undermined the validity and applicability of this study. Critiques of this study center around its overgeneralization of female performance, the failure to establish gender-neutral standards or outline specific pass/fail standards for each group, and a lack of time spent in each group. Current literature largely fails to consider the implications of gender-neutral physical standards on cohesion in mixed-gender units, warranting further study of the topic.

**Physical Fitness and Gender**

Numerous studies exist that demonstrate the aforementioned physical, biological, physiological, and therefore performance differences between men and women, but not many studies show how physical standards or perceptions of physical standards affect attitudes and experiences of servicemembers. While tests such as those conducted at IOC and RAP week represent a screening mechanism for those courses, the ACFT predicts fitness levels required to perform combat duties. Studies consistently support the design of the ACFT as a test that predicts combat soldier task performance in both men and women. Female performance on the ACFT supports the conclusion made by several scholars who argue that overall, there are no specific physical requirements associated with combat that women have consistently failed to meet.

Moreover, studies have found that certain differences in performance do not impede employment in physically demanding occupations. Ran Yanovich et al. studied the Israeli Defense Forces to determine whether gender-integrated basic training can lessen gender differences in certain parameters of physical fitness relevant to mil-

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32 Haring and Mackenzie, “Marine Corps Studies Miss the Mark.”
33 Baseline Soldier Physical Readiness Requirements Study (Iowa City: University of Iowa Virtual Soldier Research Program, 2020).
34 Mackenzie, Beyond the Band of Brothers, 104.
itary task performance and identified strategies to reduce the gap in performance. As such, though physical differences between men and women exist, women consistently surpass men in certain aspects of physical fitness and the gap in performance is not significant enough to invalidate participation in combat roles. Physical standards are therefore not reasons for excluding women but a justification for limiting their access to combat roles in the military.

The Definition of Gender-Neutral Physical Standards

Little literature or research exists on the exact effect of gender-neutral physical standards on the perception of or attitudes toward women in combat arms, in part due to the absence of a concrete definition of the meaning of gender neutral. Because there is no set definition of “gender-neutral standards,” critics argue that “all possible options for implementing ‘gender-neutral standards’ would have the effect of lowering requirements.” One definition of gender-neutral standards supported by DOD is that these standards “are based only on the physical capabilities required to perform the job, are the same for men and women, and should not differentially screen out a higher proportion of members of one gender who are, in fact, able to perform the job.” Interestingly, this definition may be impossible for women to meet for jobs that require physical capabilities that men, on average, are better suited for. Definitions of gender neutrality currently used by the military community therefore offer significant implications to policy outcomes.

Review of the existing literature on the definition of gender neutrality with regard to physical standards allows for the identification of two types of definitions or perceptions of gender neutrality. The first is largely dictated by the DOD and identifies gender-neutral physical standards as “tests and standards [that] are equally effective for both males and females.” In other words, gender is not a factor in decisions about the minimum qualifications for a job under this definition, and assessment is based on ability rather than gender. RAP exemplifies this type of gender-neutrality, as candidates are screened on standards that have not changed since the integration of women and do not distinguish between gender.

The second type of gender-neutrality refers to predictive bias in physical standards. Specifically, it perceives gender neutrality as subjective to the comparative ef-

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37 Yanovich et al., “Differences in Physical Fitness of Male and Female Recruits in Gender-Integrated Army Basic Training.”
39 Hardison, Hosek, and Bird, A Review of Best Practice Methods, xii–xiii.
40 Szayna et al., Considerations for Integrating Women into Closed Occupations in the U.S. Special Forces, 203.
fort required for a woman or man to achieve the same results. By this definition, whether or not an activity is perceived as gender-neutral depends on “conceptions regarding gender, gender differences, and beliefs about the appropriateness of participation due to gender.”\textsuperscript{41} Performance tasks with a strong focus on anaerobic performance and strength may have the same standards for both men and women, but the standards for those tasks are easier for men to achieve with less effort than would be required of a woman. Predictive bias “refers to systematic error that occurs when a test/standard is a better predictor of performance of one group (e.g., men) than another group (e.g., women).”\textsuperscript{42} Although the Army has moved away from the dual gender standards of the APFT and has adopted the gender-neutral ACFT, “gender-norming” is often treated as representing a dilution of physical standards by the military, while separate standards such as those of the APFT codify male physical fitness as superior, as men’s minimum standards are significantly higher than women’s.\textsuperscript{43}

These two types of gender neutrality help construct the classification of gender-neutral standards as neutral in terms of outcomes or in terms of metrics. This classification is further discussed in the methodology section.

**Argument**

The independent variable in this study is the context in which gender-neutral standards are implemented, with the following independent variable indicators: 1) soldiers’ perceptions of the effectiveness of a physical fitness standard in measuring combat-related fitness; 2) the degree of perceived gender-neutrality in the new physical fitness standard compared to the old one; and 3) the organizational culture of the unit or branch of Service to which a soldier belongs. The dependent variable is integration, which encompasses three indicators: cohesion, inclusion, and attitudes. All three are used to measure a level of integration qualitatively, while attrition rates before and after the implementation of the gender-neutral standard indicate the level of quantitative integration.

**Thesis:** If soldiers perceive standards as gender neutral in terms of both metric and outcome, women in combat arms units experience higher levels of integration.

For the purposes of this study, inclusion is defined as equal participation and opportunity despite existing differences. Notably, diversity does not simply translate


\textsuperscript{42} Szayna et al., *Considerations for Integrating Women into Closed Occupations in U.S. Special Operations Forces*, 206.

\textsuperscript{43} Mackenzie, *Beyond the Band of Brothers*, 111.
to inclusion—the persistent aforementioned social myths surrounding women’s participation in combat arms must be considered when considering the degree of existing inclusion.\textsuperscript{44} Cohesion describes the strength of interpersonal bonds and the trust that often results from task-related competencies, including perceived or actual physical fitness measured by assessments. This definition encompasses the definition of military or unit cohesion with that of task and social cohesion, drawing on various scholars in the field of military psychology introduced in the literature review. Finally, this study defines attitudes as evaluations of a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor.\textsuperscript{45} These evaluations, notably, can manifest themselves in behavior or stated opinion, meaning nonverbal responses and repeated behavior are just as important as explicit attitudes.

Analysis of the definitions of gender-neutrality and of the physical fitness test standards of the ACFT, RAP week, and IOC allows these standards as to be classified as gender-neutral in metric, outcome, or both. The metric-based definition of gender neutrality refers to a test like the ACFT, which applies the same metrics to measuring male and female performance. This definition fits under the DOD’s general understanding of gender neutrality. The outcome-based definition stems from literature on performance-based gender neutrality and focuses on the outcome of the fitness test—the gap between male and female performance. Table 2.1 depicts how each examined test fits into the given definitions. The asterisk next to RAP week indicates the questionable categorization of this course as gender-neutral in both outcome and metric, as attrition rates and therefore outcomes vary between classes and years.

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<td>RAP week*</td>
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<td>APFT (normed Score)</td>
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This study expects to find higher levels of integration in cases where soldiers perceive standards as gender neutral both in terms of outcome and metric because women are measured and held to the same standard and are able to achieve the same outcomes as men. This study predicts that the organizational culture of a unit as well as the mission set of each unit might also contribute to these different perceptions. Specifically, scholars point out that group norms, a formal philosophy or mission, and espoused values form organizational culture. As such, it is expected that the goals and philosophies—otherwise referred to as espoused values—of a unit define the context in which gender-neutral standards are implemented and thus the perception on the gender neutrality of a standard.

Concepts of perception and inclusion significantly contribute to the causal logic of this argument. Specifically, considering inclusion from the point of view of men and women may demonstrate a difference in perceptions of inclusion. Studies have found that “making women more aware of their stigmatized status led them to self-stereotype more in terms of their gender identity,” highlighting their sense of belonging to a group of women, not necessarily to their unit. For example, a study conducted by Cynthia L. Pickett and Marilynn B. Brewer found that when someone identifies highly with a group but also has the knowledge they are members of a “peripheral” of that group, they are more likely to engage in self-stereotyping and more negative stereotypical self-presentation. Their research also concluded that “being near the edge of the ingroup . . . should be especially threatening and may result in . . . perceiving the out-group as being more dissimilar to the ingroup than it really is.” As such, in combat arms branches or Services where women constitute a significant minority (5 percent or less of total population) and are thus a “peripheral,” women’s perception of the degree of gender neutrality of physical fitness requirements may differ from that of the men in the group.

Gender neutrality in terms of both outcome and metrics therefore has the possibility of dissolving the boundary that previously separated women from men and left women “near the edge of the ingroup.” The challenge in female integration to combat arms and overcoming the male-oriented subculture fostered by the band of brothers myth thus lies in breaking down these barriers, where women may subtly take a marginal role.

The concept of perception is likely to impact the participants’ view of inclusion and cohesion and shape their attitudes toward female integration in combat arms and must,

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therefore, be considered. Jennifer Spindel and Robert Ralston, for example, found that “respondents with combat experience, who held/hold a higher rank, and who are currently serving are more likely to endorse a task-based conception of cohesion that ties cohesion to professionalism and competence, rather than social identity.”\(^\text{50}\) The methodology section describes ways in which perception is considered as a factor in the data collected from interviews.

**Methodology**

Through semistructured interviews of enlisted as well as commissioned members of the U.S. armed forces and retired servicemembers, the author gathered information on perceptions of women in the military under a gender-neutral physical standard. Where applicable, how that perception has changed since the introduction of a gender-neutral physical standard was analyzed. A snowball sampling technique was used to recruit participants to this study. The empirical section of this study is therefore based on qualitative data used to assess the effect of the independent variables on the dependent variables. Qualitative data analysis represents the best method to answer the research question due to the variety of ways in which respondents indicate perception and attitudes toward a given issue—as was previously mentioned, verbal and nonverbal indicators contribute to an understanding of a person’s attitude on a subject. Moreover, qualitative data allows for a deeper understanding of factors that may contribute to these different attitudes such as experience, gender, and unit culture.

To conceptualize underlying patterns in interview responses, the author determined responses to each question to be either affirmative, neutral, or negative in relation to each dependent variable indicator. Interview responses were coded by analyzing verbal and nonverbal replies to the questions listed in, but not limited to, those given in the sidebar.

Specifically, the author searched for keywords that indicate a high or low level of inclusion or cohesion and a positive or negative attitude towards the integration of women. The endstate of each interview was to determine how cohesion fits into individuals’ definitions of gender neutrality as well as to determine the level of inclusion women feel after the implementation or shift toward a gender-neutral standard, whether it be an actual or perceived shift.

The independent variable this study analyzed was the context in which physical standards were implemented. The change in a certain physical standard and the perception of that change served as the indicating variables for analyzing the social context. Perceptions of the effectiveness of physical fitness tests such as the ACFT, RAP week, IOC, and CFT/PFT in representing combat-related fitness also served

as indicators of the organizational culture and thus the context of implementation of gender-neutral fitness standards.

The dependent variable—level of integration—was determined by analyzing the dependent variable indicators of inclusion, attitudes, and cohesion. Notably, this study distinguishes between qualitative and quantitative integration, analyzing the level of dependent variable indicators qualitatively as well as looking at failure or attrition rates of women in each course or fitness assessment.

As discussed in the argument section, several factors can influence perceptions of women’s performance and competence as reflected by gender-neutral physical standards. Prior experience in working with women and potential biases are very likely to affect these perceptions and will have to be considered when evaluating responses. Most importantly, male unit members’ beliefs about the standards to which women are held will influence their perceptions of women’s competence and therefore are likely to affect unit cohesion and therefore integration. Some U.S. military personnel believe that women are held to lower standards—this indication affects their perception of cohesion in a unit.51

This study is conducted under the assumption that cohesion does not cause effectiveness, as demonstrated by decades of research in group dynamics, organizational behavior, military sociology, sports psychology, and social psychology.52 Although, generally, more-cohesive groups perform better than less-cohesive groups, researchers have yet to demonstrate a causal relationship between cohesion and unit effectiveness. However, cohesion is an indicator of the level of integration within a unit, which is why cohesion remains relevant to the study.

Case Study 1: Army

Demographics
Out of 14 Army servicemembers interviewed, 6 respondents were men and 8 were women, with 2 respondents serving as noncommissioned officers (enlisted). The respondents ranged in age, rank, experience, and operational unit, though all represented combat branches within the Army or were attached to a combat branch. Out of the eight women interviewed, three attempted RAP week.

Cohesion
Most interview responses from this data set indicated that cohesion was the dependent variable indicator with the least impact on the integration of women in combat arms. In other words, the context of implementation of a gender-neutral physical fitness test (independent variable) impacted cohesion the least. Specifically, cohesion

51 Szayna et al., Considerations for Integrating Women into Closed Occupations in the U.S. Special Forces, 91.
in Army combat arms units seemed to depend less on the perception of a certain physical fitness test and more on the overall competency of a unit member. Physical fitness, notably, contributes to competency, but was only mentioned as a prerequisite to unit cohesion. Several respondents shared the opinion that “as long as [the physical fitness of a female soldier] was good enough, then [cohesion] was fine.”

One respondent highlighted several factors that seem to have a significantly greater impact on unit cohesion, specifically trust in the organization, peers, and leadership. Such cohesion is often developed through shared hardship in form of challenges that can only be accomplished if the unit works together as a team—“tough field problems, long field problems, [poor] conditions, events [soldiers] can’t do by themselves.” Although physical fitness is certainly a component of such events, fitness standards are not.

Inclusion
The context in which gender-neutral physical fitness standards were implemented did not significantly affect quantitative inclusion of women in combat arms branches. The same cannot be said for qualitative inclusion, however, as the degree of perceived gender neutrality of a fitness test such as the ACFT continues to influence the way women are viewed by their peers in combat units.

As of March 2021, 62 women have graduated Ranger School. With an estimated 35 percent female graduation rate, quantitative integration of women is comparable to the 45 percent graduation rate of men for the course as of 2019. Although female Ranger School graduates still comprise a very small minority in the Army, the attrition rate is close to that of males attempting the course. Notably, a significant limitation to the data analysis in this study is the lack of access to attrition rates specific to RAP week, which is the physical fitness evaluation examined.

Women interviewed that have attempted or successfully completed RAP week expressed their perception of the physical fitness evaluations as being neutral in both outcome and metrics in relation to gender. One woman interviewed, for example, stated that although she felt some pressure as a female going through the course, “any man that goes through Ranger School thinks he is being targeted as well.” Moreover, leaders recognized women in Ranger School and at their operational units for their excellence at the same rate as their male peers. If a soldier met or exceeded the standard, no matter their gender, the Ranger instructors acknowledged

53 29 January Army officer interview.
54 Male Army officer (anonymous), interview with author, 28 January 2021, hereafter 28 January Army officer interview.
55 28 January Army officer interview.
56 Female Army officer (anonymous), interview with author, 10 March 2021, hereafter 10 March Army officer interview.
58 10 March Army officer interview.
this and often rewarded those who performed well. The success rate of women at Ranger School and therefore passing RAP week, however, confirms RAP week as a neutral-outcome and neutral-metric physical fitness test with the population that attempts the course.

**Attitudes**

Given the demographics of the interviewed sample of respondents (the majority of whom were officers), many placed significant weight on the importance of leadership in determining the dependent variable indicator of attitudes. Several women noted that “everyone was really supportive” in a combat unit, which positively impacted their experience and therefore contributed to a welcoming environment. Such responses indicate the context of implementation of gender-neutral physical fitness standards (independent variable) such as the ACFT. A male respondent further highlighted this sentiment by solidifying the condition that “if leadership takes an approach that physical fitness is important and gives everyone the opportunity to improve and be successful with it,” leaders in units can alter the relative weight placed on the value of a gender-neutral or non-gender-neutral test.

Both male and female respondents stressed the importance of diversity and embracing differences in the physical fitness capabilities of each sex. For example, several respondents pointed out that “there are other ways for women to show value than just physical fitness” and “we need to celebrate and embrace our differences.” Those who hold this opinion agree that meeting a male-oriented physical fitness standard or passing a physical fitness assessment such as RAP week is not a necessary condition for the integration and cohesion of women in combat arms. Interestingly, these responses counter the hypothesis that gender-neutral physical fitness tests lead to greater integration of women in combat arms. The respondents’ backgrounds and experiences in specialized units may be a possible reason for this discrepancy. Another respondent highlighted the variety of missions conducted by any given unit, saying that a single standard makes sense for a single mission, but since there is a large variety of missions, fitness assessments should cater more to a mission-set than to a gender.

These points were summarized well by Dr. Kyleanne Hunter, who stated that “calling something gender-neutral says we are going to make women fit the male

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59 10 March Army officer interview.
60 Female Army officer (anonymous), interview with author, 8 March 2021, hereafter 8 March Army officer interview.
61 1 February Army officer interview.
62 Female Army officer (anonymous), interview with author, 1 February 2021, hereafter 1 February Army officer interview; and retired female Army officer (anonymous), interview with author, 20 February 2021, hereafter 20 February Army officer interview.
63 1 February Army officer interview.
standard and creates cognitive reinforcement that the ‘man way’ is the right way.”\textsuperscript{64} The findings described above thus support the creation of an alternative hypothesis that suggests gender-neutral physical fitness standards (either outcome- or metric-based) may not directly impede but certainly do not help cohesion or increase the quality of integration of women in combat arms units. In other words, gender-neutral physical fitness standards alone are not sufficient to increase integration and cohesion of women in combat arms roles.

Female respondents who graduated Ranger School shared the opinion that, at least initially, soldiers perceived women as incapable, believing women only received promotion or recognition due to politics.\textsuperscript{65} As the exposure of soldiers to women in combat roles increased with time, their perception regarding women fulfilling these roles shifted to a more receptive and accepting attitude.\textsuperscript{66} “The more touchpoints people have with seeing a demographic within a position,” said one respondent, “the easier it is to cast aside a poor performer or two as an anomaly, not the standard.”\textsuperscript{67} In other words, as quantitative integration increases, qualitative integration can be expected to increase as well.

Overall, indicators of the dependent variable (integration) proved to be highest when all members of the team recognized that—regardless of a woman’s performance on a physical fitness test—women are valuable additions to the team. Even women that failed to complete Ranger School and are currently serving in combat arms units without this qualification reported that they feel like valued members of a team. For example, one female respondent who did not graduate from Ranger School and was a platoon leader said that her fears of being judged or excluded from the team “were not validated” and that “it only matters that you can do your job and are a good leader.”\textsuperscript{68} Recognizing the inherent differences respondents may hold on the definitions of what it means to “pull your own weight” or “be a good leader,” both Army and Marine Corps servicemembers share the opinion that the descriptions above imply being able to complete an assigned task without slowing the team down, requiring significant assistance or extra resources, or preventing the team from accomplishing the mission.

The timing of the change from a non-gender-neutral test (APFT) to a metric-gender-neutral test (ACFT) did not have a significant impact on the perceptions of the effectiveness of a given test. Accordingly, cohesion and integration were not significantly impacted by this policy change. As revisions to the ACFT continue, however, Army servicemembers may begin to shift their perception of the test if these revisions seem to be directed at areas in which women tend to perform worse than their male counterparts, such as the leg tuck. As of 23 March 2021, soldiers have the

\textsuperscript{64} 20 February Army officer interview.
\textsuperscript{65} 10 March Army officer interview.
\textsuperscript{66} 10 March Army officer interview.
\textsuperscript{67} 28 January Army officer interview.
\textsuperscript{68} 8 March Army officer interview.
option to opt out of the leg tuck and perform a minimum two-minute plank instead.\textsuperscript{69} Although interviews conducted in this study failed to adequately consider this change due to its recency, it is reasonable to infer that soldiers may view this change as catered to women, many of whom have struggled to perform a leg tuck.\textsuperscript{70} This recent change warrants further study to determine the impact of the timing of changes to fitness tests on the perception of certain demographic groups.

In examining the responses relating to the independent variable indicator of organizational culture of the Army, interview responses demonstrated an accepting attitude toward embracing the differences described above. Specifically, most respondents who previously served or currently serve in the Army hold the opinion that “being able to pull your own weight without taking away from the team” has no effect on cohesion or the perception of women in combat arms.\textsuperscript{71} In other words, respondents considered it sufficient for a woman in combat arms within the Army to be “good enough” or complete the task (physical or otherwise) to standard without “being a burden” to the team.\textsuperscript{72} This view differs from that held by the Marines interviewed, which is discussed in further detail in the next section.

\textbf{Case Study 2: Marine Corps}

\textit{Demographics}

The sample consists of three male Marines and three female Marines, all of whom had experience in combat units in the Marine Corps. Though none of the female Marines interviewed attempted the Marine IOC, inferences may be made from male experiences with women in The Basic School (TBS) and the IOC to determine the effect of the independent variable on dependent variable indicators examined.

\textit{Cohesion}

Data analysis demonstrated that the context in which certain physical fitness standards are implemented does not significantly impact cohesion in the Marine Corps. Differences in the scales on which male and female Marines are evaluated do not necessarily matter to many Marines in combat roles. They recognize that “realistically, the things measured [on the fitness tests] are not the most important.”\textsuperscript{73} This attitude suggests that, contrary to this study’s expectation, some Marines perceive their physical fitness tests as relatively irrelevant and/or ineffective at measuring combat effectiveness, which is an attitude shared by some in the Army toward the ACFT.

\textsuperscript{69} “ACFT 3.0,” Army.mil, 23 March 2021.
\textsuperscript{70} Haley Britzky, “Lawmakers Are Mad About the Army’s New Fitness Test and Think the Leg Tuck Is Useless,” Task & Purpose, 21 October 2020.
\textsuperscript{71} 28 January Army officer interview.
\textsuperscript{72} 29 January Army officer interview.
\textsuperscript{73} Male Marine officer, interview with author, 20 February 2021, hereafter 20 February male Marine officer interview.
A male interviewee claimed that men in the Marine Corps “just want to see a female operate on their level and they get excited to compete [with a woman] at that level,” further noting that “if someone is physically at your level, you [as a male Marine] are more receptive and less critical to potential deficiencies they may have.”

Another respondent, however, claimed that working with a woman who could not meet the male standard on a physical fitness test “did not have a big impact on how women were viewed,” and as a superior there would be no difference “in how [he] would treat males that could not meet the standard.” In contrast to this male officer’s opinion, female Marine officers expressed the view that they felt significant pressure to perform as well as or better than their male counterparts because “some people are very stuck in a certain mentality,” though “generally people treated each other very professionally.” For women as for men in the Marine Corps, exceptional physical fitness is “an entry level price to pay” to establish unit and task cohesion.

Overall, then, men and women are expected to perform at the same level even if that expectation is not codified in Marine Corps regulations. Unlike Army servicemembers, Marines also do not think it enough for a woman to just “not be a liability.” On the contrary, respondents mentioned that women in the Marine Corps are expected to perform to the same standard or higher than the men in the unit, even if that is not necessary for their mission set. Other than the organizational value that “officers need to be better than their Marines,” no matter what their occupation, men tend to judge women in the Marine Corps based on their physical fitness.

Inclusion
Quantitatively, women in the Marine Corps experience significantly less inclusion than men do. Data was unavailable regarding the female attrition rates at IOC, but research indicates that out of 10 women to attempt the IOC since 2016 only 2 (20 percent) have graduated. In contrast, approximately 70 percent of men who attempt the IOC graduate the course. As such, the gender-neutral (in terms of metric) standards of the IOC result in less quantitative integration of women as illustrated by the high attrition rate for women attempting the course (80 percent). Notably, out of the interviewed population, both men and women in the Marine Corps perceive the

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24 20 February male Marine officer interview.  
75 Male Marine officer, interview with author, 19 March 2021, hereafter 19 March male Marine officer interview.  
76 Female Marine officer, interview with author, 16 April 2021, hereafter 16 April female Marine officer interview.  
77 Retired male Marine officer, interview with author, 12 February 2021.  
78 Female Marine officer, interview with author, 20 February 2021, hereafter 20 February female Marine officer interview.  
IOC as gender neutral in terms of metrics because “men and women are held to the same standard.”

Certain jobs within the Marine Corps actually place women at an advantage, but even in these positions female Marines are expected to be better, faster, and stronger than their subordinates and many of their peers. When operating in the human intelligence field, for example, gender poses an advantage because “they need[ed] women to do certain missions and fulfill certain roles that men were incapable of doing.”

Moreover, women in such units note that their credibility was “based off intelligence, and not [your] gender or physical test score,” though “physical fitness is definitely very important.”

In addition to interviews conducted throughout the research process, several other examples support the argument that attitudes of leaders in the Marine Corps determine the context in which the force implements gender-neutral physical standards. General Robert H. Barrow, for example, testified before Congress and argued that female integration itself would “destroy the Marine Corps . . . something no enemy has been able to do in over 200 years.” A video of his testimony was said to be largely circulated throughout the Marine Corps, undoubtedly influencing the opinion of many Marines. Although this testimony concerned the overall integration of women into combat arms branches, not fitness standards, it contributed to the more scrupulous attitude toward women in the Corps and a belief that women had to earn their spots as Marines.

As time passed and women became a part of the Marine infantry or fulfilled other combat roles, however, there have been apparent changes in attitudes of leaders and subordinates alike. As one respondent noted, “Overall, the Marine Corps will always be responsive [to change]—Marines just grumble sometimes.” Another respondent noted that “men that go through the course are pretty shocked by female capability,” meaning women have the opportunity to prove themselves and potentially alter the perception of those around them.

Where a gender-neutral standard does not exist, Marines tend to compare both men and women on the male scale. In other words, everyone is informally compared to one another on the same scale (the standard performance of men in the unit) even if they are not being evaluated on the same scale. This is the case for the Combat Fitness Test (CFT) and Physical Fitness Test (PFT)—the two fitness tests in the Marine Corps. This conclusion is further supported by one respondent’s opinion that “a
universal metric does not change the culture of the unit, just removes the argument against women.”

Therefore, from conversations with Marines, it is inferred that the most significant barrier to integration of women into the combat environment is mental and that physical standards or abilities may not necessarily sway the opinion of many Marines regarding women in combat occupations.

Summary and Discussion
Whereas Army servicemembers agreed that physical standards and performance were only as relevant as the requirements of the specific occupation or job a woman belongs to, women and men in the Marine Corps shared the opinion that even if a task or certain level of fitness was not necessary for a job, both women and men were expected to achieve that higher level of fitness.

While some women in combat arms in the Army feel less pressure or do not feel judged even when failing to complete Ranger School, women in the Marines—notably, even those not in combat occupations—feel they have “a lot to prove in the Marine Corps” and fitness is “one of those areas that a lot of male Marines tend to judge women on.”

The perception of the importance of physical fitness performance of women and men in noncombat occupations also differs from the perception held by those in the Army. The degree or type of gender neutrality of a test does not seem to matter, as Marines subconsciously evaluate both sexes on the same scale.

Marines also expressed the sentiment that physical fitness is taken more seriously in the Marine Corps as part of the culture. Specifically, one Marine noted the significant difference in the size of the Marine Corps when compared to the Army, highlighting the importance of physical fitness test scores in promotion boards and evaluations due to the extremely limited number of high-ranking command positions in the Corps.

For example, this Marine noted that a score of 250 points or more is required of any officer before attending officer-specific training, though the passing score on the test is 150. Similarly, to be promoted or at least be competitive for O-5 command, an officer must score in the 270–85 range. That is because these tests are some of the very few things that can distinguish one officer from another in an extremely selective promotion process where very few officers have the opportunity to serve in a given capacity. Although fitness test scores are a useful metric for evaluating the readiness of officers, they seem to hold too much weight in individuals’ perceptions of women and their capabilities.

Moreover, officers experience greater pressure to perform exceptionally on physical fitness standards than enlisted Marines do, which Marines recognize as “a

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89 12 February retired female Marine interview.
90 20 February female Marine officer interview.
91 19 March male Marine officer interview.
93 19 March male Marine officer interview.
cultural value of the Corps.” 94 Even the highest-ranking Marines are aware of this culture and continue to promote it. Retired general James N. Mattis noted that officers need to “be as physically tough as [their] toughest troops,” saying “don’t try to ‘wow’ [soldiers] with your knowledge if you can’t keep up with them on any run or outrun them.” 95 These comments support the argument that exceptional physical fitness is the baseline expectation in the Marine Corps without which women cannot experience full integration into combat arms.

The Army is a larger force with different requirements of its servicemembers, and the Marine Corps is generally much more focused on specific tasks related to physical fitness. 96 Moreover, the number of women seeking to participate in combat occupations in the Marine Corps is extremely low, supporting policymakers’ concerns that there are “too few . . . stalwart young ladies . . . charging into this [combat occupations].” 97 A Marine working in the Infantry Training Battalion noted that out of the women participating in this basic training required of enlisted Marines in the infantry, none expressed interest in joining the infantry after going through the training course. 98 This low interest can be due to a number of factors, such as the organizational culture of the Marine Corps and recruiting procedures. Notably, this highlights that the dependent variable indicator of quantitative integration is partially affected by the low interest of women to serve in combat arms branches in the Marine Corps.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

Data gathered from interviews with Marine and Army servicemembers supports this study’s hypothesis, but not to the extent expected. The hypothesis stated that if standards are perceived as gender neutral in terms of both metrics and outcome, women in combat arms units will experience significantly higher levels of integration. Further study refined this hypothesis by indicating that gender-neutral physical fitness standards alone are not sufficient for qualitative integration of women in combat arms. Metric-based gender-neutral physical standards may help create more favorable attitudes and contribute to cohesion in the unit as long as there is support from leadership and internal gendered scales are not introduced for the purposes of recognition or promotion. Policymakers need to consider the following factors to ensure gender-neutral fitness tests have the desired effect: organizational culture of the unit, context of implementation of a standard, and perceptions of gender neutrality.

There are several areas that future studies on the impact of gender-neutral physical fitness standards on the integration of women in combat arms should focus. First,
this study could be improved by expanding the representative sample to consider age and rank of respondents. Unfortunately, data collection did not involve conversations with enlisted women—a group that policymakers such as the former secretary of defense, Mark Esper, identified as a crucial stakeholder. Analysis of perceptions of lower enlisted servicemembers lends to comparison with the perceptions of officers in the Service and could be used to further study the impact of background experiences and organizational culture on attitudes toward gender-neutral fitness tests or the integration of women.

Second, this study could be applied to Special Operations Forces (SOF) to compare the integration of women in these units with integration of women in conventional units. Responses from participants in the data set suggested that when serving with or in a SOF unit, women felt greater belonging and qualitative inclusion. Keeping in mind the goal set out by policymakers to make “the best possible use of talents and capabilities of women who sought combat positions,” it is clear that DOD policies require alteration to support this goal and embrace differences in physical strengths of each gender.\footnote{Carter, “No Exceptions.”}

As one of the first scholarly attempts to establish a relationship between the perception of physical fitness standards and the integration of women in combat arms, this chapter is bound by limitations. More importantly, however, this study prompts further research in various spheres relating to such a pertinent issue. Additional research in this field will help the U.S. military move toward a more effective talent assessment that gives equal opportunity to all genders and facilitates integration in the best manner possible.
Starting Interview Questions
These are the questions the author asked of anonymous servicemembers in interviews conducted as part of the research for this paper.

1. Describe your occupation. Do physical fitness standards have a significant impact on your occupation?
2. In your opinion, do gender-neutral physical standards positively impact the integration of women in combat arms units?
3. Do you perceive the current ACFT/Army Ranger School/Marine Corps Infantry Officer Course physical standards as gender neutral?
4. How would you define gender neutral?
5. How have your experience and interactions with women (if applicable) differed at various duty stations and time periods?
6. (For women that successfully completed the Army Ranger School or Marine Corps Infantry Officer Course) Were you treated differently before and/or after graduating from [respective school/course]? Did you notice any significant changes in the cohesion of the unit you belonged to?
7. Was there a shift in the attitude and/or effectiveness of your team or unit after the implementation of the ACFT/after 2015?
8. In your experience, has a gender-neutral fitness assessment improved or degraded unit cohesion and the integration of women in combat arms units?
9. (For graduates of Army Ranger School or Marine Corps Officer Infantry Course since 2015) Did you notice a difference in the way women were perceived or treated during and after completion of the course/school?
10. In your opinion, has the perception of women changed since the implementation of the ACFT/removal of the Combat Endurance Test (or at the Marine Corps Officer Infantry Course)?
11. How well did your unit accomplish goals together (task cohesion)? Did you feel like part of the team (unit cohesion)?