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Organizational cynicism at the United States Naval Academy: an exploratory study

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THESIS

ORGANIZATIONAL CYNICISM AT THE UNITED STATES NAVAL ACADEMY: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

by

Leighton J. Pitre

June 2004

Co-Advisor: Roderick Bacho
Co-Advisor: Susan Hocevar

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ORGANIZATIONAL CYNICISM AT THE UNITED STATES NAVAL ACADEMY: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Lieutenant, United States Navy
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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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from the

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ABSTRACT

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND

The general topic of cynicism has drawn much attention in present day business domains due to the negative effects on morale and productivity within an organization. Cynical attitudes lead to employees feeling like the principles of honesty, fairness, and sincerity are sacrificed to further the needs of the organization (Abraham, 2000). Alienation and lack of commitment toward an organization (Brandes, 1997) also stem from these cynical attitudes. The United States Naval Academy (USNA), although not the typical business domain, shares many similarities with large, business-like organizations, and one could argue that some of the same principles that cause employees of an organization to become cynical, could lead to the development of cynicism in midshipmen. These cynical attitudes developed by midshipmen are contrary to the primary mission of the United States Naval Academy which is to develop midshipmen morally, mentally, and physically. Also, previous research has shown that cynicism reduces organizational commitment (Abraham, 2000) and increases alienation (Brandes, 1997). Given these findings, cynicism in midshipmen can only be detrimental to their development as Naval Officers. This thesis explores some of the causes of cynical attitudes of midshipmen towards USNA and its administration.

Researchers at the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) have studied the topic of cynicism with cadets attending the Academy. In their initial research paper, Brockway, Carlson, Jones, and Bryant (2002) accomplished three important steps in understanding organizational cynicism:

(1) They offered a conceptual definition of student cynicism:

> *Student cynicism is an attitude, characterized by frustration and negatively valenced beliefs, resulting primarily from unmet expectations, which is capable of being directed toward the college experience in general and/or more specific facets of the college environment* (p.211).

1

(2) They created on operational definition of student cynicism, in the form of an 18-item measure. Through extensive testing, they showed that the measure, known as the Cynical Attitudes Toward College Scale (CATCS), is a reliable and valid measure of student cynicism.

(3) They created a tentative model of student cynicism. Basically, they suggested that students make comparisons between their expectations of various college dimensions and their experiences of those actual dimensions. If a mismatch exists, then cynical attitudes may follow.

More recent research efforts at USAFA have focused on testing one specific aspect of their model. Specifically, Carlson, Jones, Field, and Zimmerman (2002) have shown that student cynicism is associated with unmet expectations. The researchers asked USAFA cadets to answer one set of questions pertaining to the degree to which USAFA was meeting their expectations with regard to four different dimensions (i.e. academic, social, administrative/policy, and overall). The researchers also had the cadets complete the 18-item CATCS. The results from the research showed that the degree to which USAFA was meeting cadets' expectation was negatively correlated with their cynicism. It is this idea of unmet expectations which this thesis will explore at USNA. However, this thesis will not focus on quantitative data pertaining to unmet expectations, but rather focus on understanding, qualitatively, what expectations are not being met by USNA with regard to midshipmen.

B.   PURPOSE

In recent years, the United States Naval Academy has identified the development of cynical attitudes among midshipmen and has taken steps to try and stop the spread of cynicism. Steps such as dispelling rumors, keeping midshipmen informed, and having the administration set the example for midshipmen are some of the things done to curtail cynical attitudes. The administration recognizes the detrimental affects that cynicism can have on the Brigade of Midshipmen. Lack of organizational commitment and alienation also effect newly commissioned officers entering the fleet and will ultimately have an effect on fleet retention.

While the presence of cynicism may be acknowledged by USNA, there has been no substantial qualitative research on the causes of cynicism at USNA. Logic would suggest that based on previous research done at USAFA, cynical attitudes that develop in midshipmen are, at least in part, a result of unmet expectations. These unmet expectations could be caused by the gaps between perception and reality in a variety of areas such as academics, social activities, administration processes, etc. The topic of interest of this thesis is the perceived gap in reality and expectations by midshipmen as it pertains to dealings with the administration. This thesis focuses on the interaction between midshipmen and administration because focusing on this interaction will give institution a greater and more immediate opportunity to take action in the curtailment of cynicism.

This thesis will examine the research question that a mismatch between a student's expectations and experiences at the Academy leads to the development of cynicism. Furthermore, it will examine and hopefully identify areas at which the administration can look in order to mitigate the development and subsequent spread of cynicism throughout the Brigade of Midshipmen.

C.   SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

1.   Research Questions

This research examines the antecedents of cynical attitudes of midshipmen at USNA focusing on unmet expectations due to a perceived gap in reality versus expectations. Focus groups were conducted to determine the causes of cynicism due to unmet expectations perpetuated by the interaction between administration and midshipmen. Finally, causes of cynicism are examined to determine what can be done by the administration to curtail the genesis and spread of cynical attitudes.

2.   Scope

This research does not attempt to determine all of the causes of cynicism or how to totally alleviate cynicism. Rather, this research is an attempt to take a preliminary, qualitative look at the causes of cynicism so that the administration of USNA has a better understanding of cynicism's origins. Furthermore, this research attempts to determine

some of the causes of cynicism in order to better promote the mission of USNA by curtailing some of the cynicism plaguing the Brigade of Midshipmen.

Midshipmen of the class of 2004 were chosen to participate in focus groups to determine the causes of cynicism. Although demographics were recorded, attributes such as sex, religion, race, etc., are not a determinant in organizational cynicism. Past research suggests that demographics play a role in cynicism, but that those forms of cynicism come in the form of academic, social, or political cynicism, etc. This thesis is only looking at the causes of cynicism caused by the interaction between administration and midshipmen, therefore, demographics are not a factor.

Also, the interactions between midshipmen and administration that cause cynicism are the focus of this thesis because of the ability of the leadership to alter its interactions in order to curtail the cynicism. Hopefully, this study will aid the Academy's administration in producing more committed, non-cynical, non-alienated midshipmen for commission in the naval service as officers.

3.   Methodology

Focus groups containing a convenience sample of 30 First Class Midshipmen were conducted to collect qualitative data. A *Systematic Qualitative Research* process was used to determine whether or not cynicism is present at the Academy, what are some of the causes of cynicism at the Academy, and what are some of the effects of cynicism on midshipmen. While studying the data, themes became evident and were documented and summarized. Amplifying quotes were used to illustrate the developed themes. Finally, based on the data collected, recommendations were made in order to aid the administration in combating the onset and spread of cynicism throughout the Brigade of Midshipmen.

D.   ORGANIZATION OF STUDY

This thesis is organized into five chapters. The next chapter cites various studies that discuss the causes and problems having to do with cynicism. It also looks at the prior USAFA study on cynicism. Chapter III discusses the methods used in conducting the focus groups and how the data is collected. Additionally, there is an overview of the script used to conduct the focus groups. Chapter IV explains the data used in this

research and the results formulated by thematic analysis done on the data gathered. Finally, Chapter V provides conclusions about the findings regarding the causes of cynicism and recommendations on what can be done by the administration to combat cynicism. Finally, recommendations for further research are also provided.

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II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. INTRODUCTION

A cynic is someone who "agrees that lying, putting on a false face, and taking advantage of others are fundamental to human character and conclude that, basically, people are just out for themselves" (Mirvis & Kanter, 1991). Cynicism is defined as a negative attitude toward one's employing organization, composed of the belief that the organization lacks integrity; it includes negative affect toward the organization and a tendency to disparaging and critical behavior toward the organization consistent with this belief and affect (Abraham, 2000). Furthermore, cynicism can breed disillusionment within an organization. This disillusionment can manifest itself in negative attitudes and ill-will towards one's employing organization (Abraham, 2000).

Some researchers have argued that employee cynicism can have some positive effects on the organization, such as providing a necessary "check" on the workings of the organization (Dean, Brandes, & Dharwadkar, 1998). However, the bulk of the writing focuses much more on the negative effects of cynicism. Common themes in the literature regarding organizations with high levels of cynicism are lack of integrity, unfairness, lack of sincerity, stress, overwork, and self-interest (Abraham, 2000). These cynical beliefs and negative emotions may be both actively and passively expressed through harsh criticism of the organization (Abraham, 2000). When employees are cynical, the operations and customs of even the most genuinely proactive organizations, including quality initiatives, community involvement, and employee empowerment, are frequently questioned, and dissatisfaction is openly expressed (Abraham, 2000). Cynicism may even manifest itself in "supercilious pleasure" at the failure of an organization to achieve goals and high moral standards (Abraham, 2000).

These cynical attitudes can also lead to alienation from the organization, hindering employees' organizational commitment (Brandes, 1997) and organizational citizenship (Abraham, 2000). The person who is part of an organization that breeds cynicism will learn to distrust, to be wary, and to suspect the worst in the organization (Secretan, 2000). Once this behavior becomes habitual, these feelings may translate into

self-fulfilling prophecy (Secretan, 2000), because "cynics are demoralizing leaders" (Secretan, 2000, p.23).

Andersson's (1996) research implies that organizational cynicism in business settings is caused by the violation of the implied contract between employers and employees and is a manifestation of burnout. Burnout, in this instance, means the degradation of a worker's performance due to dissatisfaction and disillusionment with his or her employer. While the idea of burnout can only be loosely applied to midshipmen at the Academy, the explanation inferred is that cynicism is a negative attitude that stems from unmet expectations. For instance, Andersson (1996) suggests that, when people begin their jobs, they are likely to make a "psychological contract" with their employers. This psychological contract is inferred from the employee's expectations of the organization. If that contract is violated (i.e., expectations are unmet) cynicism may result. This explanation suggests that the key to understanding cynicism comes from a better understanding of employees' expectations in comparison with their actual experience in the organization.

B.   STUDY OF EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCE

The literature reviewed above suggests that cynicism occurs as a result of a mismatch between midshipmen's expectations and their subsequent college experience. Mirvis & Kanter (1989) put it best when they went on to explain that the recipe for cynicism is simple -- hype up people's hopes in an organization, disappoint them, and then take advantage of them until the onset of disillusionment. Again, Mirvis & Kanter (1989) found that the there are three key ingredients to cynicism: 1) unrealistically high expectations of oneself and others; 2) the experience of disappointment in one's own actions and the action of others; and 3) being deceived by others.

1.   High and Unmet Expectations

An example of how high expectations can relate to cynicism can be seen in one of the earliest discussions of student cynicism by Becker and Geer (1958). They noted that there was a remarkably high level of cynicism among medical school students. Beginning medical school students, by nature, are likely to be very enthusiastic about the hope of learning to cure diseases and saving lives. However, these idealistic attitudes

may be replaced by more negative attitudes caused by the immediate and harsh realities of medical school life. In this instance, the students may become cynical due to their unrealistically high expectations.

Not unique to medical school students, cynicism also develops in new under-graduates due to their expectations being unmet. In the 1960's, a host of studies (Standing & Parker, 1964; Pervin, 1966; Stern, 1966; Shaw, 1968) demonstrated a phenomenon subsequently labeled the "freshman myth" – where new college students held expectations that were much more ideal than the experiences of actual students. Stern (1966) went on to claim that these idealistic expectations were often "naïve, enthusiastic, and boundless."

These ideas can be directly correlated to the high expectations that midshipmen may have prior to entering the Academy. The three major military academies have earned very good reputations as premier educational, physical, and morally centered institutions. They compare favorably in academics with the very best colleges and universities in the country. They are unsurpassed in their physical and moral training of *every* graduate and in their training of future military officers. Therefore, it stands to reason that appointees to theses institutions enter with very high expectations for both the academic and non-academic experiences they may encounter. This does not lead to cynicism when the academies are able to fulfill these expectations, but what happens when these students are then bogged down with the day-to-day life and operations of the Academy? They are also immersed in literature that praises the honor and integrity of Academy patrons. What happens when they witness honor violations and bad examples from their peers and leadership?

2.   Disappointment

Disappointment in one's own actions and the actions of others can take many forms in an institution like the United States Naval Academy. Midshipmen's disappointment in their peers' behavior or their leadership's behavior is very detrimental to the emotional growth of midshipmen, and is something that is quite contrary to the mantra that all professional officers live by – setting the example. This disappointment is also a direct result of unmet expectations. Midshipmen expect their classmates and

leadership to set and live by the example of a professional officer. Graves (1996) said that leaders in an organization must provide examples of behaviors for those in their charge rather than just providing oral guidance. Leadership must demonstrate a commitment to the ideals of honesty, fairness, justice, courage, integrity, loyalty, and compassion (Graves, 1996). A question to be examined by this thesis is whether such experiences lead to cynicism toward the organization.

C.   OTHER FORMS OF CYNICISM

There are other forms of cynicism that can be found in the literature. Each of the various forms of cynicism represents their own distinct constructs and has their own explanations for how they develop. Political cynicism (Lee, 2002), social cynicism (Abraham, 2000), and work-related cynicism (Graves, 1996 & Andersson, 1996) are all explored in the literature. However, if one looks closely, there is a common thread in all of the research presented – unmet expectations. By approaching cynicism in this more general manner, I have focused on organizational cynicism and have steered away from looking at cynicism based on personality, traits, or job-specific items, which tend to focus more on human nature in general.

Brandes, Dean, and Dharwadkar (1998) have proposed that cynical attitudes seen in organizations can be traced back to feelings by its employees that an organization lacks integrity. The organization is perceived to be more concerned with the bottom-line or production rather than taking care of its people. Employees may also believe that the choices of organizational direction are based on the organization's self interest (Goldner, Ritti, & Ference, 1977). Along with the feelings that organizational direction is based on self interests, many workers in the organization feel that their fellow co-workers are inconsistent and unreliable in their behaviors (Goldner, Ritti, & Ference, 1977). If you look closely at these statements, I believe the underlying principle is the idea of unmet expectations.

1.   Personality-based Cynicism

Personality-based cynicism is an inherent and stable trait found in some people, and is characterized by cynical contempt and weak interpersonal bonding. The types of people that display this sort of emotion have a deep-rooted mistrust of others based upon

the notion that the world is a dishonest, conniving, and an uncaring place (Abraham, 2000). Greenglass & Julkunen (1989) characterize the type of person that may display personality cynicism by saying that these people often wonder what hidden reason there may be when someone does something nice for them. Inherent distrust of people causes cynicism because although the expectation is that people should be nice to them, the reality they have experienced has forced them to think otherwise.

2. Societal/Institutional Cynicism

Societal cynicism is defined by Peterson (1994) as a breach of social contract between the individual and society. A social contract is a belief by an individual that there is a reciprocal exchange agreement with another individual that is being upheld (Rousseau, 1989). The social contract that is between the American Government and its populous is the promise of freedom, property, individual liberties and so forth. These ideas of freedom, property, and individual liberties are the expectations that individuals have with regard to our government (Abraham, 2000). When a person exhibits societal or institutional cynicism, that person has a warranted feeling that his or her expectations are not being fulfilled.

3. Organizational Change Cynicism

In today's business environment, many companies have chosen to embark on ambitious programs to redefine their business and stay competitive. In order to accomplish this mission, they often institute new programs and so-called quality initiatives that are rapidly implemented and have a presumption of compliance from those whom it affects (Reichers, Wanous, & Austin, 1997). These programs often promise a great number of improvements in productivity and worker treatment. These programs often quickly fail leaving those who are affected feeling initially disappointed and betrayed (Abraham, 2000). Cynicism ensues as the worker realizes that his expectations of better working conditions and benefits are not met. This breech of psychological contract between worker and employer will create future pessimism and cynicism toward change efforts. This future pessimism and cynicism is a defense mechanism which the worker uses to protect his or her psyche from further unmet expectations.

The bottom line in illustrating the above different types of cynicism is to show that the root tends to be unmet expectations. The literature goes on to explain other forms of cynicism such as police cynicism, student cynicism, and political cynicism, etc., but they all demonstrate the same root cause as explained above.

D.   PROBLEMS WITH CYNICISM

The Naval Academy strives to give young men and women an up-to-date academic and professional training program needed to be effective Naval and Marine Corps Officers. The United States Naval Academy uses the words "to develop midshipmen morally, mentally, and physically," as the baseline for which each program is tailored.

Moral and ethical development is also a fundamental element of all aspects of the Naval Academy experience. As future officers in the Navy or Marine Corps, midshipmen will someday be responsible for the priceless lives of many men and women and multi-million dollar equipment. Having stated all of this, one can see where cynicism could breakdown the fabric and spirit of the institution. Applying these concepts towards midshipmen at the Naval Academy, one could conclude that cynicism is not only detrimental to the mission of the Academy, but could also transfer to the attitudes that a newly commissioned officer brings to the fleet.

In relating Secretan's (2000) ideas about cynical members of an organization to midshipmen and officers, midshipmen or officers who are part of an organization that breeds cynicism will learn to distrust, to be wary, and to suspect the worst in the Academy and the Navy. Once these cynical beliefs become habitual, the beliefs may translate into a self-fulfilling prophecy (Secretan, 2000). Ultimately, this self-fulfilling prophecy will affect his or her leadership. Secretan (2000) said it best when describing the leadership of members of a cynical organization by stating, "cynics are demoralizing leaders". The implications of a cynical midshipmen graduating to become a "demoralizing leader" are far reaching and could only have detrimental affects in the fleet.

Distrust of an institution by its members stemming from this organizational cynicism also breeds an us-versus-them mentality. Distrust of the leadership at the

Academy, and an us-versus-them mentality can only lead to a breakdown in the mission that the Academy is trying to accomplish, which is the preparation of young men and women to lead our nation's forces. An us-versus-them mentality can also constrain and limit a midshipmen's commitment to the mission of the Academy. These cynical midshipmen can then go on to instill these same attitudes in other midshipmen. Eisinger (2000) said that members of an organization who are not personally invested in their institution will have higher levels of distrust which will result in feeling disconnected and angry which will then go on to perpetuate organizational cynicism. The same could be said for midshipmen at the Academy.

Members of an organization that are cynical tend to think that the institution is "for sale," and that the institution is not looking out for the welfare of its members, but rather, only looking out for the bottom-line (Loeb, 2002). Dean, Brandes, and Dharwadkar (1998) supported this idea when they postulated that cynical members of an organization tend to think that principles such as honesty, fairness, and integrity are betrayed, at the expense of its members, to further the interest of the organization. Members who believe this idea are more likely to expect an organization is deceiving them, rather than accepting the rationale behind organizational decisions (Dean, Brandes, & Dharwadkar, 1998). Also, based on this mistrust of the organization, cynical members develop and spread notions that no institution, truths, or community bonds are worth fighting for (Loeb, 2002). If you apply these ideas to midshipmen at the Academy, midshipmen who are cynical would not believe that the institution follows its own espoused principles, and would more likely believe that the institution is trying to deceive them rather than telling them the truth behind organizational decisions. More importantly, cynical midshipmen would also believe that the beliefs and principles espoused by the Academy are not worth supporting or fighting for.

Along with the idea that cynical members of an organization think that the institution is "for sale" and only worried about its bottom line, Loeb (2002) also stated that cynical members of an organization believed that their peers are "for sale" and only care about themselves. This belief also leads cynical members to think that their co-workers will use whatever means possible to gain advantage in the work environment (Dean, Brandes, & Dharwadkar, 1998). This dissatisfaction with their co-workers is a

product of the difference between their principles and the principles of others in the organization (Wiener, 1982). This difference in principles would then lead the cynical member to stop socializing with others (Abraham, 2000). Socialization, Abraham (2000) says, is an important technique by which the values of an organization are spread throughout its workers. Therefore, midshipmen who believe that their classmates are "for sale" and are worried only about themselves, would be less likely to socialize and thus less likely to experience the espoused values of the Academy through interaction with their classmates.

As stated earlier, cynical beliefs and attitudes may be both "overtly" and "covertly" expressed through the use of harsh criticisms or dissidence towards the organization (Abraham, 2000). One can postulate, then, that midshipmen who are cynical may tend to work against the institution and may find ways to sabotage the institution's successes (Abraham, 2000). Cynicism may even cause "supercilious pleasure" at the failure of the organization to achieve the goals and high moral standards, which will in turn only validate the notion of a member's distrust for an institution (Abraham, 2000). In relating this to the Academy, midshipmen who are cynical may try to sabotage the Academy's successes, find pleasure in its failures, and then feel satisfied that their cynical attitudes toward the Academy have been proven correct.

Disappointment, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, not only causes cynicism, but also has a number of problems associated with it. Disappointment can also come in the form of a perceived demand for perfection. For example, as Naval Officers, we are often required to perform our jobs with zero errors, because the cost of one single error may be a human life. This standard of perfection can then be carried over to the Academy experience. Midshipmen could learn to be careful and learn not to take risks which parallels what Secretan (2000) said about members of a cynical organization. This learning or programming of members of an organization to be careful and not take risks, conflicts with other espoused values such as risk taking, courage, inventiveness, etc. (Secretan, 2000).

E.   CHAPTER SUMMARY

In this chapter I have shown that the basis behind all types of cynicism is the idea that the divergence between a person's expectations and the reality of what actually happens, causes people to be cynical. It is my belief that this gap between expectation and reality is the main reason for the presence of cynicism at the Academy. The literature also illustrates how cynicism, once fostered, can break down the quality initiatives, programs, and progress made towards the Academy achieving its goal.

The purpose of this study is to determine whether it is a gap in expectations versus reality that causes organizational cynicism at the United States Naval Academy.

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III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter looked at the some of the causes and consequences of organizational cynicism. This research has shown in the literature review that organizational cynicism can be caused by unmet expectations, as perceived by the organization's members. This research examines the antecedents of cynical attitudes of midshipmen at USNA focusing on unmet expectations due to a perceived gap in reality versus expectations.

The areas that are covered in this research focus on the interaction between the midshipmen of the United States Naval Academy and its administration. This relationship was looked at in order to determine some of the causes of cynicism within the organization. The focus was limited to this interaction between administration and midshipmen due to three reasons:

- To give the Commandant's Staff insight into what midshipmen are thinking in regard to causes of cynicism.

- To increase the awareness of the Commandant's Staff of the causes of cynicism in order for them to better support the mission and strategic plan of the Academy.

- Personal interest, as a member of the administration and of the midshipmen's chain of command, in learning about ways to reduce cynicism that is within my role domain.

Cynicism that may be caused by the rigors of academics or athletics, etc, was intentionally avoided during the focus groups. The reasons for excluding these other causes of cynicism were due to the impracticality of changing the academic and athletic requirements of the institution. Changing the academic and athletic requirements of the institution is impractical due to the governing bodies of these entities being exterior to the jurisdiction of Academy administration.

This chapter also explains how the focus groups were conducted. Focus groups were chosen because of their ability to provide a more in-depth understanding of issues related to cynicism at the United States Naval Academy.

B. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

A *Systematic Qualitative Research* approach was followed while conducting the focus groups and analyzing the data. The method used consisted of the following steps:

1. Determined focus group participants.

2. Developed a protocol to be used with all focus groups.

3. Collected the data.

4. Coded and reduced the data.

5. Analyzed the data.

This chapter will describe the process by which focus group participants were chosen, the development of the focus group protocol, and the methods used to collect, code, and reduce data for analysis.

1. Focus Group Participants

The goal of this research was to identify the causes of cynicism at the United States Naval Academy. To accomplish this, focus groups were used to answer specific questions that addressed this issue. A convenience sample of six groups of five midshipmen each was selected from the Class of 2004. Midshipmen attending the class NL400: Law for the Junior Officer, were asked to participate in a focus group study researching attitudes of midshipmen at the Naval Academy. The midshipmen solicited were not told that the focus groups were going to focus on cynicism. After 30 midshipmen responded affirmatively to participate, the focus groups were conducted in six groups of five midshipmen each.

The focus groups consisted of midshipmen ranging in ages from 22 to 26 years of age with the average age being 22.5 years. The sample was 73.3% male (83.4% institutional average) and 26.7% female (16.6% institutional average). Additional focus group demographics can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1.   Demographics

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Men	22	73.3
Women	8	26.7
Race:		
Caucasian	25	83.3
African-American	3	10.0
Hispanic	1	3.3
Other	1	3.3

First Class Midshipmen were used in order to obtain opinions from the group that has had the most exposure to the Academy and its administration. Only seniors were interviewed due to their leadership roles in the brigade and their extended experience at the Academy. Also, due to short time interval in which they will be entering the fleet as naval officers, a look at the causes and effects of cynicism may allow to the Academy to produce a better product in the form of more committed and positive officer corps. Other classes of midshipmen could be beneficial to the study in determining the causes of cynicism, but due to time constraints and sheer scope of study, looking at other classes was not feasible. One could postulate however, that some of the causes of cynicism in the class of 2004 are some of the same things that are causing cynicism in the other classes of midshipmen. Some of the other classes of midshipmen may be experiencing different forms of cynicism (plebe demands, academic requirements, adjustment to Academy life) than the senior class, but this research is trying to focus on causes of cynicism due to the administration/midshipmen interaction, the likes of which should not be class specific.

2.   Focus Group Protocol

The main objective of this research was to determine the causes of cynicism in midshipmen due to their interaction with the administration. A protocol was developed based on the Cynical Attitudes Toward College Scale (CATCS) developed by researchers at the United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) (Brockway, Carlson, Jones, & Bryant,

2002). The CATCS is an instrument developed by USAFA researchers Brockway, Carlson, Jones, and Bryant (2002) that measures student cynicism based on the idea of unmet expectations. The CATCS covered multiple topics including policy cynicism, academic cynicism, social cynicism, and institutional cynicism. However, given the scope of this thesis, the protocol used in this research was developed focusing on questions regarding institutional and policy cynicism in the CATCS. This protocol focused on midshipmen and administration interaction vice the cynicism that may be caused by academics, class structure, requirements, etc. A standard protocol of questions was used for all groups. In addition, each focus group was introduced by addressing the following issues:

- Instructing participants in focus group protocol by stating the rules to be used during the focus group and by explaining to the participants what to expect.

- Encouraging participant response by asking open-ended questions, and then probing the participants for more focused responses.

- Informing participants of my intentions to ensure confidentiality and what to expect with regards to tape recordings by explaining to them every facet of how I plan to record, analyze, and report their responses.

Figure 1 represents the final version of this protocol.

Figure 1.   FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL

Introduction and Purpose

Hello, my name is Leighton Pitre, you can call me Pete, and I am in the LEAD Program doing research on Organizational Cynicism at the United States Naval Academy. I am reviewing information on various aspects of Academy life, training, Academy administration, and overall feeling on cynicism and what its causes within the brigade are. Cynicism that you may be harbor towards academics, sports, or any entity outside the realm of the administration, is not the focus. The focus is the cynicism that may be caused by the relationship between the Brigade of Midshipmen and the administration. For those of you who don't know, cynicism is defined as an attitude, characterized by frustration and negatively valenced beliefs, resulting primarily from unmet expectations, which is capable of being directed toward the Academy experience in general and/or more specific facets of the Academy environment.

I will be talking with random First Class Midshipmen around the brigade in order to find out about your experiences with cynicism and its possible causes. This discussion today will take about an hour of your time and I'll be recording the discussions and using the recordings to help prepare my report.

I want to assure you that I am interested in your opinions on various issues, but not who you are specifically. That is why I have asked that you provide only your first name on the name signs. When I write my report, I will not be using any names, and along with that, I would also appreciate it if you did not use any names or company numbers during our discussion. If you do happen to slip and use a name, I won't include it in any of my findings because I am not interested in witch hunts or finger pointing, but rather the betterment of the relationship between midshipmen and administration and the elimination of cynicism. It is very important for me to obtain your opinions on these issues, and I will do whatever is necessary to ensure the confidentiality of your comments and participation.

Before I go any further, does everyone understand what I mean by saying the relationship between midshipmen and administration? [PAUSE TO WAIT FOR RESPONSE AND DISCUSS]

Have any of you ever participated in a focus group before? [SHOW OF HANDS] A focus group is simply a group of people gathered together to discuss a specific topic. The purpose is to gather your ideas and opinions. It is not necessary for you to come to consensus or agreement. In fact, people have different opinions and that's good, and it is important that I hear about all of them.

I have just three ground rules for conducting this focus group:
  - First, speak loudly and clearly.
  - Second, speak one at a time, no side conversations.

- Third, each of you needs to speak at least once so that we get everyone's views.

If there are no other questions, I would like to go ahead and get started.

1. Is this institution what you expected before entering? In what ways is it different? Have these contributed to your cynicism?

2. What do you think is the biggest aspect of the student-administration dynamic that causes you to be most cynical?

Probe: Is this student/admin dynamic any different than you thought it would be before coming to USNA? How is it different?

Probe: It seems that one "dynamic" might be the consistency (or lack of) between what administration says and what it does. Is this the case? Give examples.

3. What about the administration asking you for input? Do you think the administration asks for input from the students? In what situations?

Probe: What do you think they do with this input?

Probe: How does this match with what you expected?

4. Are there policies that lead to cynicism among the mids? Give me an example.

Probe: How are these policies different from what you expected?

5. What about life in general here? Do you think the administration tries to make this a better place to live and perform?

Probe: Do you think the Academy administration cares more about students or outside interests?

Probe: Are there ways in which this balance between "outside interests" and student-interests contributes to cynicism?

Probe: Is that any different than you thought it would be when agreeing to come here?

6. How about the social environment, do you think the social environment is similar to what you expected?

Probe: Probe: Do you think that midshipmen could handle more social liberties? Do you expect that midshipmen would handle the extra responsibility with no problems or do you think there would be problems?

7. Do your peers do anything that tends to make you cynical? What are some examples?

Probe: Do you expect different behavior out of them?

8. Finally, I'd like to gather some demographic information from you. Let's finish by you telling me your name, age, gender, and whether or not you think cynicism is a problem at the United States Naval Academy.

3. Data Collection and Cleaning

Six focus groups of five midshipmen each were conducted. For each focus group, the author was present as the facilitator. A tape recorder was placed in the room with a proximity microphone attached so that each midshipman could be heard and understood. The data was then scrutinized in order to determine if there was any unusable or undesirable data. There was no unusable or undesirable data.

4. Coding, Data Reduction, and Analysis

Initially, the each tape was listened to in order to determine whether or not cynicism was present and whether or not cynicism was due to unmet expectations. The first run through the tapes was used to determine whether or not cynicism was present at the Academy. The last question of the protocol plainly asks whether or not cynicism is present at the academy. Each tape was listened to in order to determine this response. Anytime a midshipman stated that cynicism was present or that he or she was cynical, the author marked it down.

Next, each tape was listened to in order to determine whether or not there was a gap in expectations versus reality that was causing midshipmen to be cynical. For each question asked, the author marked down each time a midshipman said that the reality of a situation was not as expected. All of the questions in the protocol either ask in the main inquiry whether or not the situation was as expected, or asks a probe into whether or not the situation was as expected. Since the questions are tailored to inquire about a situation that is causing a midshipman to be cynical, any response that a midshipman gave stating

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that the situation was not as expected, the author could then determine that it was a gap in expectations versus reality that caused the midshipmen to be cynical in that particular situation.

The tapes were then listened to individually one question at a time. For example, all of the responses to the first question were listened to on all six tapes. Out of all the responses, the author determined whether or not there were any themes that developed. In order to determine this, criteria had to be determined. The assumption was made that any idea reported by midshipmen that was common to the same question on all six tapes, qualified, for purposes of this research, as a theme. Themes were then compiled and recorded.

Finally, the tapes were listened to repeatedly in order to find quoted selections that emphasized and expounded on the themes that had developed. Multiple quotes were compiled for each theme. The author then picked from among the compiled quotes, selections that would best explain or support the themes that had developed while conducting the focus groups.

IV.   RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

A.   INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to obtain valuable insight into the thoughts and expectations of midshipmen in relation to their reality which could then lead to cynical attitudes.   Throughout this section, many thoughts and opinions are offered but no assumption is made that these thoughts and opinions are the definitive answers to how the Academy is actually run or how the organization conducts business in reality.   These thoughts and opinions are the thoughts and opinions perceived by the midshipmen who participated in the focus groups. The questions asked in the focus groups were tailored to only look at administrative aspects of the Academy that contribute to cynicism among midshipmen.

Additionally, this study is limited solely to midshipmen's perceptions about cynicism that is caused by the interaction between Academy administration [Commandant's Staff and support structure] and midshipmen. This research does not make the presumption that this interaction between administration, in this context, and midshipmen is the only medium that causes cynicism among midshipmen. Things such as athletics, academics, sexual harassment, racism, were intentionally left unexplored. This research did look at cynicism that may be caused by peer to peer interaction which could be classified as social cynicism.   However, this research is assuming that some of the cynicism that can be attributed to peer to peer interactions is organizational because these interactions occur in the context of administration policies and requirements and are thus within the domain of the stated research questions.

B.   IS CYNICISM PRESENT?

Through the use of focus groups, it is clear that cynicism exists at the Academy and 29 of the 30 midshipmen considered themselves cynical to a certain extent. There were varying degrees of cynicism that became evident throughout the interviews with the feelings ranging from strong criticality of the institution to more general unhappiness with life at the Academy. Some of the stronger feelings of cynicism can be seen in comments such as:

Before coming here, I thought the place had some of the smartest and most honorable young people in America…[laughter]… it was definitely different than I thought it was going to be…the constant disappointment in my classmates and the constant micro-management by the company officers has caused me to more cynical than I ever dreamed I could be.

This place has done more to cause me to be cynical than I have ever been in my entire life.

The constant witch hunt to try and catch you doing something that breaks one of the million rules in midregs is exhausting…I've never been a part of an organization that is so petty.

I've been cynical since the day ac [academic] year started after plebe summer…it has only gotten worst since then.

And some of the more general feelings of cynicism can be seen in comments such as:

I believe the Academy tries to eliminate cynicism, but when you are expected to live by all the rules in midregs, you can't help but get cynical.

Cynicism is a way of life here; you just have to learn how to deal with it.

I think cynicism would be less of a problem if the administration treated us like junior officers instead of saying they treat us like JO's [junior officers] and then controlling everything we do.

Yeah, if I dwell on the little things that drive me crazy about this place, I guess I would be more cynical, but I choose to ignore it so that I can focus on graduating from this place. Don't get me wrong though, it is almost more effort trying to ignore those things so that I won't become cynical.

The questions asked during the focus groups were tailored so that the midshipmen would respond with regard to a situation or feeling that is causing them to be cynical. Nonetheless, when asked whether or not they thought cynicism was a problem at the Academy, there was an almost unanimous affirmative response. Many of the midshipmen plainly stated that they *are* cynical and that they *were not* cynical prior to enrollment in the institution.

One shortcoming of this research is that the notion of personality cynicism was not taken into account prior to conducting the focus groups, therefore, it cannot be said with certainty that the midshipmen interviewed are cynical based on the relationship between themselves and the administration or if the midshipmen interviewed have a

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propensity to be cynical based on their personality. However, due to the random nature of the sample, it is unlikely that the 29 of 30 midshipmen, who reported moderate to strong cynicism, could be solely explained by personality based cynicism.

The questions and focus groups were tailored to filter out any comments made on causes of cynicism external to the midshipmen-administration interaction. The data presented below describe the sources and effects of cynicism as reported by focus group participants.

C. EFFECTS OF CYNICISM

The effects and problems that are associated with cynicism were discussed in Chapter II of this research, and can also be seen in some of the comments made by midshipmen during the focus groups. Themes that were brought forward in the literature identifying the effects and problems of cynicism were validated by some of the comments made by individual midshipmen.

1. Organizational Commitment and Citizenship

The theme of organizational cynicism causing a lack of organizational commitment was found to be the most prevalent during the focus groups with more than half of the midshipmen reporting a lack of commitment of some sort. A few midshipmen interviewed made the following comments:

I wish everyday that I had taken that ROTC scholarship.

Life here can be overwhelming, and sometimes I wish I would not have signed the commitment junior year. [a commitment is voluntarily signed junior year that obligates a midshipman to military service following graduation and commission]

Don't get me wrong, there are some good things at this place, most of it having to do with the prestige of graduating from the Academy. But let's just say that when I leave here, I won't be looking back.

These findings support the ideas postulated by Abraham (2000) and Brandes who found that cynical attitudes toward an organization can lead to a lack of organizational commitment and a lack of organizational citizenship. This lack of organizational commitment and citizenship can lead midshipmen to be more disconnected with the institution and less likely to conform to the standards of conduct required of every

midshipman. These disconnected and cynical midshipmen could then go on to perpetuate and spread organizational cynicism as postulated by Eisinger (2000).

The lack of organizational commitment that cynical midshipmen possess can also manifest itself in the feeling that nothing about the institution is worth fighting for (Loeb, 2000). This feeling is evident in the quote by one midshipman interviewed that said:

> The Academy is more worried about being on the front page of the Washington Post than what the Brigade of Midshipmen thinks…and they preach to us about being loyal to ship, shipmate, self…how can I be loyal to the Academy when I don't get the same in return?

While this is only one comment made by one midshipman, the implications of how damaging cynicism can be to an organization are evident.

2.   Decision-making Skills

An issue of particular interest to the Academy at present is the notion of instilling decision-making skills in midshipmen. The Academy has identified this as a weakness among graduating midshipmen and has taken steps to determine how decision-making and risk-taking skills can be taught in the current curriculum. There is research currently being done to look at recommendations and the feasibility of adding the teaching of these skills as an integral part of the Academy experience (Healey, 2004). Comments made by participants in the study presented here indicate a link between cynicism and decision making skills.

Secretan (2000) postulated that cynical members of an organization learn to be careful and learn not to take risks. This reluctance to make decisions and take risks was reported by over half of the midshipmen interviewed. Some of the sentiments expressed by the midshipmen interviewed can be seen in the quote:

> I think we lose a lot of the chances to figure out what's important in life because we're not making any of those decisions and we don't have that responsibility. I think that's a major problem.

Another midshipman interviewed went on to say:

> What's the incentive for being creative with the leadership of your subordinates…the administration will tell you what to do anyway. It becomes very easy to just do what you are told and stay under the radar [meaning the cognizance of the company officers and administration].

There is strong evidence in the literature that suggests that cynicism will cause this reluctance to make decisions and take risks (Secretan, 2000). The literature also suggests that cynical members of an organization become so disconnected from their workplace due to cynicism, that the activity of work is no longer a means of personal self expression (Abraham, 2000). These workers then lose their ability to think creatively and to think for themselves. According to Loeb and Cunningham (2002), cynical workers convince themselves that nothing will change, therefore they are content with the status quo and are reluctant to propose new ideas or changes.

The first part of this chapter describes how the focus groups show the presence of cynicism at the Academy and the negative effects that cynicism can have on an organization such as the Academy, the remaining parts of the chapter will focus on specific themes identified in the analyses of the focus group data. The following themes were prevalent and evident by the statements of multiple midshipmen. This research does not speculate that these are the only causes of cynicism at the Academy, but rather that the following themes were answers given by the majority of the midshipmen interviewed in the focus groups.

## D.	THEME 1:	DECISION MAKING

Across all focus groups, the most commonly identified source of cynicism was that the midshipmen interviewed felt as though they are not given the opportunity to make mature decisions on their own. They expressed that they should be treated as young junior officers and given the freedom to make choices that would go along with that rank. Midshipmen reported that much of their day-to-day life is dictated to them. Some said that while they are expected to act as young, mature, junior officers, there are not many circumstances in which they can exercise their own judgment. One midshipman said:

> I expected to enter the Academy and be among the nations brightest young men and women and to be treated in that way…I mean…everything we do here is governed by midregs and midregs covers everything that you could possibly do in a day right down to what kind of shoes to wear in PT gear…Even our own personal spaces, like rooms, are controlled in every way possible. Don't get me wrong, I know rooms have to be kept clean, but why can't I have a TV in my room if I want to…why can't I have a refrigerator. In the grand scheme of things, are those such a big deal?

Another midshipman said:

> That's what this place doesn't give us at all – the chance to take responsibility for who we are. This place basically gives us everything…We're not living in a situation where we have to take care of ourselves. They feed us, they take our trash, they do our laundry, we're forced to go to class – it's not our decisions…the responsibility of choosing to do it or not to do it and making our own decisions about whether it's important or not really doesn't lie with us.

The expectation that midshipmen have of being treated as young, junior officers is quite contrary to the reality they perceive with every aspect of their lives being controlled. When asked if this treatment is what they expected, all midshipmen interviewed stated that they did not expect to be treated in this manner prior to enrollment. Taking into account that the questions asked had to do with what makes them cynical, one can conclude that this gap in expectation versus reality contributes to their cynicism. The midshipmen interviewed acknowledged the problems that could go along with having certain freedoms by not making the right decisions if they were given the opportunity. However, they reported that having the ability to make those decisions aids the maturing process and outweighs any negative effects that making the wrong decisions may cause.

The gap in expectations versus reality that midshipmen reported with regard to decision discretion also relates to their expectations of having the opportunity to make decisions and learn from their mistakes, without paying large penalties for infractions. Midshipmen reported that in their perception, they are not allowed to make and learn from mistakes, but rather are punished greatly for what they consider minor infractions. While this may be far from what actually happens at the Academy, midshipmen perceive this zero-defect mentality as their reality, and this gap in their expectations and reality causes them to become cynical. Two different midshipmen said:

> You are almost forced to cover everything up here…One small infraction and the academy goes on a witch hunt to find and track down as many midshipmen involved as they can, and write you up for as many infractions as they can.
>
> If we had more freedom to make choices and some midshipmen ended up doing the wrong things, wouldn't it be better to let them make the

mistakes and be held accountable for them prior to being commissioned instead of sheltering them so much they don't even no how to make the right choices?

This freedom to govern their own personal choices is a major theme when asked to elaborate on how different this institution is in reality versus how they expected to be treated upon entering the Academy. This gap in expectation versus reality in how they should be treated as young, junior officers, and adults, is the most common cause for the cynicism that is present in the Brigade of Midshipmen as evidenced by the focus groups.

E.   THEME 2:   PEER EXPECTATIONS

Another theme that arose from a gap between midshipmen's expectations and reality of this institution is how their own peers act and treat one another. Over two thirds of the midshipmen interviewed reported a disappointment in the lack of moral behavior of their peers; something they expected to be different before entering. Upon entering the Academy, midshipmen reported that they believed as though they were enrolling into an institution that has some of the best and brightest students from around the country. Many of the midshipmen interviewed think of the Academy as equivalent to most Ivy League schools and believe that the student body is comparable to that vision of the best and the brightest.

Of all the concerns about their peers' behaviors, the moral aspect of their peers' behaviors is the most prominent contributor to the gap between expectations and reality with two thirds of the midshipmen reporting this as the case. One midshipman said:

> I haven't met a midshipman yet that has not lied, cheated or stolen. The honor concept is a joke here…I mean where are we when we even have members of the honor staff that are getting caught lying?

A different concern about honor was described by another midshipman:

> I sat in on an honor board one time and it really had a negative effect on me. I was a plebe at the time. It seemed to me that they focused less on the issue at hand and his honor and they turned it more into a witch hunt and pulling every bad thing that they could ever find about the kid and do everything that they possibly could do to give him a bad rap and prove him guilty that it went straight off topic and they talked about things that had nothing to do with the issue at hand. It just seemed like they were trying as hard as they could to get him kicked out and they ignored, in my

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opinion, overwhelming evidence that he really wasn't a dishonorable person. That had a tremendously negative impact on me seeing first hand how the honor system in that instance was really overwhelmingly trying to kick someone out. That was probably the most negative thing I've ever witnessed.

This gap in expectations versus reality of how their peers should conduct themselves contributes to midshipmen cynicism. Goldner, Ritti, & Ference (1977) report that members of an organization who are cynical believe that the organization's members are inconsistent and unreliable. Also, the literature suggests that people who are cynical believe that other members of the organization lack integrity (Dean, Brandes, & Dharwadkar, 1998) and consequently, when this lack of integrity is witnessed, more cynicism ensues (Goldner, Ritti, & Ference, 1977). In other words, this inconsistency and unreliability of members' actions cause others to become cynical and these cynical people then tend to think everyone lacks integrity. Also, when they finally witness a lapse in integrity, their assumptions are validated.

The midshipmen interviewed acknowledged that they themselves have been guilty of not following the guidelines set forth by the honor system and are not willing to report their classmates for infractions because of their unwillingness to be the "whistle blowers" in those situations. This unwillingness to correct deficiencies in their classmates' behaviors then further perpetuates the spread of cynicism throughout the brigade. Although they are disappointed in the behavior of other midshipmen, the stigma that goes along with turning in their classmates for moral violations comes at too high a cost in how they perceive peers will treat them afterwards. Midshipmen interviewed expressed to have a tolerance for immoral behavior that supercedes their tolerance to be ostracized by their classmates. One midshipman felt as though:

> I don't want to go through the trouble of turning someone in for an honor violation. You've been here sir, you understand how it goes. You basically have to defend yourself tooth and nail when you put someone in for an honor offense. Sometimes cases are black and white but the honor board will keep asking you questions until it looks as though you are unsure of what happened and they end up dismissing the case. Then, all of a sudden, you look like the liar and you look like a jackass for turning your classmate in…You then get a stigma that no one wants to be associated with you because they think you are one of those guys that is just itching to turn someone in.

Along with the feelings that their peers' are a disappointment morally, over half of the midshipmen interviewed reported feeling as though their peers are always looking to do the minimum vice striving to be the best, which is something they expected when entering the Academy. This difference between expectations and reality of their peers' performance causes midshipmen to become cynical. Midshipmen reported that they feel as though their classmates are out for themselves and just looking to get by with the minimum performance with few exceptions. The literature reports the same phenomenon and states that cynical members of an organization often feel as though their peers will do whatever possible to gain profit or advantage rather than lose it (Abraham, 2000). One midshipman who was in a leadership position said that:

> I can spend most of my day tracking down people who are not doing what they are supposed to instead of looking forward and trying to figure out ways to make things run more smoothly or figuring out ways to make our lives easier.

This perception held by the interviewees that midshipmen are doing just what is necessary to get by is pervasive; but participants also believe that this is not the case at other places. Midshipmen reported that because much of their freedoms are taken away and there are so many rules to live by, they tend to lean on the side of just doing enough to keep people off of their backs, or enough to stay "under the radar" as they would say. Midshipmen reported that the organizational climate is such that it sets up midshipmen to ere towards the side of just doing enough to get by; an attitude that is very different from their expectations prior to enrollment, and which consequently, causes them to become cynical. When asked if they think the typical ROTC midshipmen acted in the same ways, one midshipman said:

> When I was on summer cruise, I had the CO of the ship tell me that the problem with Academy grads is that they ask, 'What do I need to do to get by?' while the typical ROTC guy says, 'What do I need to do to do my best?'…and the CO was an Academy grad and seemed to be proud of that fact. I think he hit the nail on the head.

They attribute this lapse in performance to the military environment that they are a part of, and one midshipman justified it by saying:

ROTC guys have the freedom to act as individuals and are excited when they get to finally perform in a military environment. We on the other hand, are immersed in that kind of environment and learn how to play the game so to speak.

The midshipmen interviewed reported that they understand that this type of behavior is not what they expected when entering the Academy and understand that it is not what the institution stands for, but they believe it is a fact of life at the Academy because of the demands of Academy life. The midshipmen interviewed went on to report that because of their own struggles with Academy life, they are willing to live with the poor examples and poor performance of their peers.

F. THEME 3: ORGANIZATIONAL CONSISTENCIES

Out of the 30 midshipmen interviewed, the 29 of them stated that they see the Academy administration as consistent in its promises and practices. Although all but one midshipman interviewed said that the Academy administration is consistent in its actions, when asked whether or not there were any organizational inconsistencies that contributed to their cynicism, a few themes emerged.

1. Leadership Qualities

Midshipmen are taught and quickly learn what the definitions of good leaders are, but there seems to be a discrepancy in their minds about what the Academy, as an institution, reinforces and rewards as examples of good leaders among midshipmen. The midshipmen interviewed feel as though an emphasis is placed on grades, uniform appearance, and physical tests scores, rather than on the intangibles (integrity, charisma, fairness, etc.) that make them leaders among their peers. One midshipman said:

> I think that one negative thing I've seen for a lot of people is a lot of striper boards and selection processes… It's kind of frustrating for a lot of people to see people who we know to be characters who you wouldn't want as your leadership, and to see them being granted opportunities. I guess it's kind of like being slighted. I don't think that helps, because a lot of people are like why should I strive to be this [good leader] midshipman when there's really no positive affects from it?

The midshipmen interviewed believe that qualities of good leaders, as they are taught, are not being acknowledged by the administration when it comes time to picking the leadership of the brigade. Another midshipman said:

> They just look at this score and that score in that order and that sort of thing. You can't put a number or a percentile on character or moral virtue. So you end up with people in a position who don't really have a following of respect.

When questioned how they thought the concept of peer rankings plays into the selection of brigade leadership, the majority of midshipmen said that it was a good idea to use them, but should only be a small part of the criteria for selection. The midshipmen reported that leadership positions should be based on the more intangible aspects such as character, leadership potential, and integrity. One midshipman said this about the peer ranking system:

> Peer rankings are good, but when they look at rankings for striper boards they only look at the company officer ranking anyway. Plus the company officer has the most weight [numerical weight as part of an equation] in those rankings anyway. So it still boils down to a numbers game [the most quantitatively superior record].

When the question was asked why they do not feel that this inconsistency contributes to their cynicism, they acknowledged that the administration has no other way of gauging whether or not a midshipman is a good leader, and they admitted that peer rankings and the more quantitative measures are probably the best way to compare candidates. However, the fact that peer rankings can sometimes be skewed because of cliques that form among their peer groups, causes them to become cynical. Although they believe the striper selection criteria [looking at records vice leadership qualities] used are not the same as those they are taught to be important leadership characteristics, the midshipmen interviewed did not offer a better solution for the selection of brigade leadership. Nonetheless, the midshipmen interviewed still viewed this discrepancy as contributing to their cynicism.

2. Company Officers

While most midshipmen interviewed agree that their company officers set good examples and are good role models to emulate, there was a sentiment that some cynicism is caused by the organizational inconsistencies from company officer to company officer. Midshipmen feel as though some company officers are much more lenient in upholding standards than other company officers. This inconsistency among the company officers

tends to create cynicism within the brigade. The midshipmen interviewed expect to have the same standards placed on them regardless of what company officer they are in the presence of, but the reality is that company officers are inconsistent and this leads midshipmen to become cynical. One midshipman said:

> I have a company officer that will fry me for wearing my shirt un-tucked…I have seen other companies that can get away with minor infractions like that. Some company officers seem to take care of things in creative ways, others seem to fry. I wish it was the same throughout.

Another midshipman went on to say:

> My company officer goes around looking for things to fry us for instead of trying to be a leader and developing us as midshipmen. Some do a good job of that.

When asked whether or not Company Officers should have the latitude to use their judgment in upholding standards, the midshipmen reported that a company officer should be given the responsibility of using his or her own judgment when correcting minor infractions, but go on to say that inconsistencies still contribute to the cynicism towards the administration and company officers. Although, the perceived inconsistencies of company officers causes cynicism among midshipmen, the midshipmen interviewed believed that the benefits of each company handling business in their own creative ways outweighs the cynicism that it causes among midshipmen.

G.   THEME 4:   OUTSIDE INTERESTS

A question was asked during the focus groups about quality of life, followed by a probe as to whether or not midshipmen thought that the Academy administration cares more about students' interests or outside interests. This question, admittedly, is leading and was asked due to the fact that the focus group questions were based on the CATCS mentioned earlier in this research. It is the opinion of the author that this theme may not have surfaced if the midshipmen were not specifically asked about the idea of outside interests.

There were generally positive comments made when asked whether or not the Academy promotes quality of life. However, a follow-up question asked whether or not the Academy cared more about outside interests or midshipmen's well being with all of

the midshipmen responding that they perceived the Academy as more attentive to outside interests and political pressures vice midshipmen's well being. However, no specific instances of this discrepancy were mentioned during the interviews. When asked whether or not they expected this to be different, all of the midshipmen interviewed stated that they expected the Academy to have midshipmen welfare as the main concern vice political, outside, or alumni pressures, which they feel is the reality of the situation. Goldner, Ritti, & Ference (1977) argued that cynical members of an organization feel that organizational direction and choices are based on the organization's self interest vice the interest of its members. Loeb (2000) also argued the same idea when he theorized that cynical members of an organization perceive that the institution is more worried about the "bottom-line" than the welfare if its members. This is the same phenomenon that midshipmen expressed in the focus groups. When asked to elaborate on this more, one midshipman said:

> This place has a knee-jerk reaction to everything because they are afraid of being on the front page of the [Washington] Post.

> We are so afraid of what might leak out to the press here that we tend to cover up problems or go haywire and fry everybody…that's not the answer.

With regard to alumni pressure, one midshipman said:

> There are a hundred old alumni just sitting outside the gates waiting to tell the supe how this Academy is more screwed up now than when they went to school here. Does the Academy listen? I think the feeling around here is that the Academy does listen….after all…alumni money runs this place, you can see that with NAAA.

This perception the midshipmen interviewed have of the Academy being susceptible to alumni and political pressures at the expense of midshipmen welfare, is causing midshipmen to become cynical.

H.   SUMMARY

The focus of this study is to show, qualitatively, how cynicism relates to the divergence between a student's expectations of how things should work compared to the reality of attending the Academy. The questions were tailored to determine whether or not the midshipmen interviewed recognized a difference in expectations and reality and

whether or not this contributed to their cynicism. Of the 30 midshipmen interviewed, the majority alluded to and affirmed that it was a gap between their expectations versus their reality that causes them to be cynical. The themes of (1) not having the opportunity to make mature decisions, (2) disappointment in peers' actions, (3) organizational inconsistencies, and (4) catering to outside interests were reported. Comments that illustrate the extent to which the themes are present, and which add concrete evidence to the developed themes were also reported. Along with the presence of cynicism and themes reported, some of the ramifications of cynicism such as (1) lack of organizational commitment and citizenship and (2) deficiencies in decision-making and risk taking skills were illustrated by midshipmen quotes, and in some cases, related back to the literature in order to show correlations.

V.   CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

> Cynicism takes the notion that every institution and every person is for sale, and enshrines it as an eternal truth. It insists that human motives are debased and always will be. Cynicism implies that no institutions, truths, or community bonds are worth fighting for (Loeb, Rogat & Cunningham, 2002).

A.   OVERVIEW

Loeb, Rogat & Cunningham's (2002) introductory quote summarizes why the study of the causes of organizational cynicism is so important. At a place like the United States Naval Academy where the core values are honor, courage, and commitment, and the mission is to develop midshipmen morally, mentally, and physically, the onset and spread of cynicism can be devastating. The graduates of the Academy have the added responsibility of becoming leaders of sailors and marines in the fleet compared to their typical civilian counterparts. The cynicism that they may bring with them to the fleet could ultimately affect their leadership qualities and ability to lead men and women in battle.

If the Academy, as an organization, had a better understanding of the causes of cynicism, they would be better equipped to fulfill the mission of the institution and ensure that the nation is receiving the best possible officers for leadership of its armed forces. Cynicism has been studied in other realms of academia, but little research has been done on the causes of cynicism at the United States Naval Academy. The Commandant of Midshipmen [addressing LEAD Cohort IV in June 2004] has acknowledged that cynicism is a problem at the institution, and consequently, the institution has completed various surveys and questionnaires that allude to the causes of cynicism. However, no one study has been done at the United States Naval Academy that focuses solely on organizational cynicism. With this in mind, the author summarizes the findings and presents suggestions for future research in this final chapter.

B.   CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The intention of this research design was to do a qualitative, exploratory study, with findings representing the input of 30 First Class Midshipmen. The focus was on

identifying possible causes of organizational cynicism as derived from aspects of administration policy and practices. These results provide signals of possible concern, but need to be further validated by a more broad-based study taking into account the findings presented here.

In this research, the author attempted to answer the question presented in Chapter I of whether or not a mismatch between a student's expectations and experiences at the Academy leads to the development of cynicism. The literature, presented in Chapter II, expounded on this idea and showed how cynicism is related to the gap in expectations versus reality. Chapter II also outlined some other forms of cynicism vice just organizational cynicism. Although there were different types of cynicism presented, the literature also supported the notion that those other forms of cynicism are caused by a gap in expectations versus reality of members of an organization. The author showed that, although there are different types of organizational cynicism and a variety of causes are presented; the common thread between all forms of organizational cynicism is the gap in expectations versus reality.

The interview data, presented in Chapter IV, suggested that the causes of cynicism in midshipmen at the Academy stem from a gap between their experienced reality versus the high, unmet expectations they have prior to enrollment. The interview data provides thematic evidence of possible causes of cynicism among midshipmen.

1.   Decision Making

Theory suggests that members of an organization who have the highest levels of cynicism are those who said they participated little in decision-making. Members who lack meaningful opportunity to make decisions and who feel that supervisors do not care to communicate with them about any opinions they may have, exhibited higher levels of cynicism (Reichers, Wanous & Austin, 1997). Adding to this, the extent that a member's lack of participation contributes to the failures and shortcomings of the institution only amplifies the pessimism and cynicism that a member will have (Reichers, Wanous & Austin, 1997). Mirvis and Kanter (1989) go on to suggest that cynical members of an organization carry around the notion that the organization does not care about the welfare of its members.

The interview data analyzed for this thesis supports these theories; midshipmen feel as though they should be treated as junior officers and should be allowed to make more decisions with regard to their day-to-day activities and welfare. The interview data suggested that midshipmen feel as though the bulk their decisions are made for them and that they are not allowed to exercise judgment in the majority of situations. Most of the interview data suggested that midshipmen were unhappy about the amount of time scheduled each day, the lack of free time and liberty, expression of individuality, and the lack of opportunity to handle personal responsibilities. Midshipmen understand the costly implications of allowing them to make these types of decisions, but feel that the opportunity to make these types of decisions is part of the growing and maturation processes of becoming a responsible adult and officer.

A recommendation to curtail this cause of cynicism is for the Academy to continue to research new ways in which to allow increased responsibility for personal decision making. There is research being done, presently, that focuses on decision making education (Healey, 2004) and some recommendations to improve these skills in midshipmen. The Academy has identified this as a deficiency and is making progress towards addressing this issue.

2. Peer Expectations

Theory suggests that individuals who have unrealistically high expectations of others and who are continuously experiencing disappointment in others' actions, along with continuously being deceived by others, have high levels of cynicism (Mirvis & Kanter, 1989). The midshipmen interview data supports this suggestion. The midshipmen interviewed feel as though their classmates do not live up to the high expectations they had, prior to enrollment, of the type of student that attends the Academy. Becker & Geer (1958) also noted the same phenomenon among newly appointed medical students (Mirvis & Kanter 1989). The medical students enter medical school with the idea that their classmates will be some of the best and brightest, with above average integrity, but then quickly become disappointed when their classmates show them otherwise due to the rigors of medical school (Becker & Geer, 1958). One can directly correlate this same phenomenon with the data gathered on midshipmen with regards to their own peer interactions.

One recommendation to alleviate this cause of cynicism is to continue looking at new ways to train midshipmen on the merits of integrity and performing within standards. This is a continuing problem that the Academy has identified previously and continues to work to eliminate.

3. Leadership Qualities

Abraham (2000) suggests that a psychological contract is made between employee and employer that implicitly promises fair and equal treatment, and promotion based on merit (expectation). When an employee senses a breech (reality) of this psychological contract, cynicism ensues. The interview data supports this hypothesis; midshipmen feel as though the brigade leadership is selected based on selective, quantifiable criteria that overlook important, intangible characteristics that are taught as aspects of effective leadership. Midshipmen interviewed perceived that the brigade leadership is selected based on tangible aspects such as academic, performance, and physical scores. Although these are indicative of above average performers, midshipmen feel as though the leadership qualities of those selected is in question. Midshipmen reported that they know their own classmates best and they should be involved in the direct selection of the brigade leadership.

A recommendation to alleviate this cause of cynicism is to allow midshipmen to select the brigade leadership vice the Academy administration. The administration should have ultimate approval, but the midshipmen that are the leaders of their peers should be selected by their peers.

4. Company Officers

The argument was made in Chapter II that when the psychological contract between employee and employer is broken, cynicism ensues (Abraham, 2000). This psychological contract could come in the form of expectations of fair treatment and/or equality for all members of an organization. Relating this idea to Academy, midshipmen reported that they become cynical when this psychological contract is broken between the company officer and themselves. Midshipmen overwhelmingly reported that a cause of cynicism for them is the perception of unequal treatment by company officers depending on what company they belong to. Midshipmen reported that there is a disparity in the

distribution of justice (Price & Mueller, 1996) across the brigade with regard to individual company officers. Although midshipmen value the freedom of each company officer to run their own company, the unequal distribution of justice and standards cause them to become cynical.

One recommendation to combat this cause of cynicism is to promote company officers to get together and discuss how they try to offer decision discretion so they can, as a group, address possible problems in perceived inconsistency by midshipmen. With that stated, although midshipmen reported that this inconsistency causes them to become cynical, they also reported that they place a higher value in the autonomy afforded to each company and company officer.

5.   Outside Interests

Theory suggests that individuals who sense that an organization is more concerned with the bottom-line or profit margins (reality) vice the welfare of its members (expectation), are more likely to become cynical (Goldner, Ritti, & Ference, 1977). The interview data supports this hypothesis; midshipmen feel as though the Academy organization is motivated more so by political and alumni pressure than the actual welfare of its members (Loeb, 2000). Midshipmen reported that there is a perception among them that some of the rules that are still around are based on alumni and political pressures.

A recommendation to curtail this type of cynicism is to continue to emphasize the use of communication in keeping midshipmen informed on important Academy decisions. Midshipmen who have a general overall perception of why the administration makes some of the decisions it makes, will be less likely to assume that the Academy administration is yielding to political and alumni pressures.

This notion of outside interests, reported by the midshipmen interviewed, is a primary driver of cynicism. However, although midshipmen reported that they believed the academy was more concerned about political and alumni pressures than the welfare of midshipmen, the author believes that this may be a way for midshipmen to rationalize some of the tight constraints on behavior at the Academy. In other words, a midshipmen may believe that what he or she perceives as the harsh realities of Academy life, is really

the product of political an alumni pressure on the institution. However, this is the opinion of the author and further investigation into this hypothesis would be warranted in order to produce a more definitive conclusion.

C. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This research provides some preliminary evidence as to causes of organizational cynicism at the United States Naval Academy. Another intention of this research is to lay the groundwork for future study at the Academy pertaining to organizational cynicism. The United States Air Force Academy (USAFA) has done research in this area of organizational and student cynicism (Carlson, Jones, Field, & Zimmerman, 2002) that could be used as a basis for a more comprehensive study at the United States Naval Academy. Modifications to the USAFA study should reflect any findings or conclusions that this research provides.

The most important recommendation that can be made to curtail cynicism caused by the gap in expectations versus reality is to formulate a method that closes this gap. The gap is between expectations that midshipmen have prior to enrollment, and their reality of Academy life. In order to close this gap, either of two things can happen. Either, the Academy administration can devise ways to change the expectations of midshipmen prior to enrollment, or it can take steps to change the reality experienced by midshipmen once they are a part of the institution. Indeed, closing the gap and reducing cynicism can be accomplished by both of these approaches. In order to change the expectations of incoming midshipmen, it is important to first determine the expectations of incoming midshipmen. A recommended way of doing this is to issue a more broad-based, survey-type questionnaire focusing on incoming midshipmen's expectations prior to their enrollment. The Academy could then use this data to compare to the realities of the institution, and use the data to formulate a strategy that will change expectations to become more congruent with the realities of the institution.

Also, a future study of cynicism could explore other antecedents of cynicism such as academics, athletics, and the more social aspects of being a midshipman. This thesis has focused on the idea of unmet expectations related to the interaction between

midshipmen and administration. It is likely that cynicism is influenced by other factors as well and a more comprehensive examination would provide more definitive findings.

A noted problem with the data gathered for this research is that midshipmen were asked to report on their expectations and experiences at the same time. In other words, midshipmen were asked to report on their expectations prior to entering the Academy *after* they have been at the Academy for an extended period of time. Given the malleability of memory (Schacter, 1999), it is conceivable that midshipmen are unable to report on what their *a priori* expectations were prior to enrollment. A better test of the hypothesis that unmet expectations lead to cynicism would require that data on expectations prior to enrollment could begin prior the beginning of their Academy experience.

In short, the previous recommendations contribute to the body of knowledge that exists pertaining to organizational and student cynicism. This basic understanding of cynicism could possibly influence (1) organizational directives, (2) peer interaction, (3) training curriculum, and (4) company officer development and preparation. If the United States Naval Academy continues to commit the time and resources needed to study the phenomenon of cynicism more thoroughly, accomplishing the Academy's primary objective will be enhanced -- developing midshipmen morally, mentally, and physically.

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