



Fighting Alone

The Challenge of Shrinking Social Capital and the Army Profession

Maj. Charlie Lewis, U.S. Army

FORT BLISS WAS recognized “as a promising model for the Army” after a 30 percent drop in suicides this year. To foster trust, support, and connections to lower the suicide rate, the commander, Maj. Gen. Dana J.H. Pittard, opened Fort Bliss to the public, created outdoor spaces, and “reintroduced dayrooms” where soldiers can gather.¹ These actions increased *social capital*, which is the social networks, norms of reciprocity, and social trust among soldiers, units, and the community. The Bliss model demonstrates the strength of such connections among soldiers, their leaders, their families, and their local surroundings. However, the model has not expanded across the Army.

As the military faces large budget and personnel cuts and an end to combat operations, the Army as a profession must enhance the social trust and esprit de corps it requires through *social capital* development. If social capital declines precipitously, the strength of the Army Profession will face a similar drop. Challenges include limited training resources, making what once occurred naturally—the development of social capital and its trustworthiness and pride—hard to find, leaving soldiers to *fight alone*, instead of as a team. Beyond training, other chances to foster the Army’s culture are diminishing.

Unit interactions are limited to the workday because of decreased funding for outside activities. Even living together is changing. Increased communications and social media access allows members of the profession to remain more connected to hometowns, thereby isolating themselves, lowering the value of the Army culture, and increasing the problems, like suicide and sexual assault. Bridges are cut between the Army and society because of fewer bases, fewer Americans serving, and geography sorting the American population from soldiers. Preventing this situation requires leaders and soldiers to incorporate methods aimed at maintaining current levels of social capital. The greatest challenge facing the Army as a profession over the next decade is a collapse of social capital and the associated bonds, reciprocity, and trust upon which the Army Profession thrives.

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PHOTO: A soldier assigned to 2nd Squadron, 2nd Cavalry, provides security during counter-improvised explosive device training in Grafenwoehr Training Area, Germany, 18 April 2013. (U.S. Army, Gertrud Zach)

In defining social capital and its role in the Army Profession, I argue that it has the power to maintain the strength of the profession. By exposing weaknesses in the Army's social capital, I demonstrate how to develop methods to structure both trust and esprit de corps within the Army Profession to address this challenge.

Social Capital Defined

Social capital refers to "social networks, norms of reciprocity, mutual assistance, and trustworthiness."² Identified first in 1916, social capital's scholarly use has increased since the 1990s with the release of Harvard Professor Robert Putnam's research on the subject.³ Putnam first identifies the power of social capital by highlighting how it improves "the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions."⁴ Societies high in social capital also see an increased sense of pride, or esprit de corps, which further unites community members. In addition, Putnam identifies "trust as an essential component of social capital."

Trust arises personally at the local level, and grows to large organizations and communities through *social trust*.⁵ However, social trust is not just trust in an organization but is trust between people who when aggregated, equates to improved outcomes.⁶ If embedded in a group, social trust "enables action" because others anticipate a specific behavior from the actor.⁷

Two sources of social capital exist: norms of reciprocity and networks of civic engagement. Reciprocity increases trust by limiting collective action problems or those situations where group members benefit whether or not they contribute. Norms arise from routine behaviors and expectations. Generalized reciprocity, or when one acts without expecting anything in return, can enhance social capital more than trading favors.⁸ Moreover, networks of civic engagement are an "essential form of social capital" and lead to closer communities.⁹ Such networks come in a variety of forms, for examples the American Legion, schools, families, the workplace, or churches. These communities require "interdependence," furthering trust development among members.¹⁰

There are two kinds of social capital: *bonding* and *bridging*. Bonding social capital is between groups of similar individuals, like church groups

and ethnic organizations. A group based on bonding results in strong in-group loyalty. However, bridging social capital consists of connections across diverse social groups, like large social movements and youth service groups. These connections are good for information diffusion and linking communities and networks. Bridging social capital benefits those in and outside of the group due to positive externalities. In other words, those outside the group also accrue the benefits provided by social capital.¹¹

Incorporating the economic influence of the word "capital," social capital also serves as both a private and a public good. As a private or individual good, social capital helps members by reaching out to their network and the associated norms of trust to get ahead.¹² Individuals within the network see improved outcomes economically, physically, socially, and educationally. Further private benefits come from trusting those around you to "lend a helping hand" or offer support during tough times. While those examples assist those within networks, organizations can provide benefits to those outside the network through fund raising, volunteering, or support. Those activities connect group members to people outside it, further providing externalities.¹³



1st Armored Division soldiers receive suicide prevention training during the Army Wide Suicide Safety Stand Down Day on Fort Bliss, Texas, 27 September 2012. (U.S. Army)

Building Social Capital

So how do we build social capital? A variety of communities, organizations, schools, and employers create social capital through policies, structure, and activities. Like-minded individuals can form groups around a variety of interests. Organizations like the Elks, Rotary Club, and Veterans of Foreign Wars provide examples of individuals coming together. In addition, school communities—both public, private, and charter—offer chances to build social capital. All these opportunities require a place to congregate, meet, and build the bonds needed for the trust found in social capital. Beyond the members, the place facilitates gathering to form networks and the associated norms.

The workplace, as the “single most important site of cooperative interaction and sociability among adult citizens outside the family,” also provides a contemporary potential for social capital.¹⁴ While some argue that the forced association and hierarchical leadership of the workplace might limit opportunities for social capital, it is possible to create the bonds needed for social capital. Work also generates a diffusion of opinions, ideas, and beliefs.¹⁵ While the average workplace—because our time is not our own and we involuntarily associate for a paycheck—is not a complete solution to finding social capital, there are opportunities if we can integrate work lives with social lives and the community.¹⁶

Social Capital Measured

Recent data shows that social capital declined throughout the United States over the past half century. Putnam’s *Bowling Alone* addresses this decline through an in-depth diagnosis of declining political participation, civic engagement, church attendance, and general community engagement. Other researchers identified a decline in social trust in American youth, as well, resulting from an increase in materialistic values that erode the virtues necessary for collective action.¹⁷ Putnam also sees this generational decline in trust “accelerating.”¹⁸

Where does this decline come from? Some argue it might be television or computers.¹⁹ Increased television consumption among youth undermines their interaction with others and involvement in activities. While not causal, there is a correlation between television usage and decreased civic engagement because heavy watchers spend time isolated—watch-

ing television instead of conducting civic activities.²⁰ Moreover, studies of social media and mutual support found that online social networkers feel isolated, despite large numbers of “friends.”²¹ In addition, a sorted population limits bridging opportunities. Beyond suburbanization and the opportunity costs of long commutes on families, communities, and activities, clustering of like-minded individuals destroys bridging social capital. In his book *The Big Sort*, Bill Russell found that political segregation from sorting reinforced inequalities.²²

Why does this decline matter? States with increased social capital have less crime. Education improves. Sense of community develops. In addition, social networks provide a safety net through “tangible assistance,” like money, care, and transportation. Moreover, evidence leads to social capital improving health outcomes and norms and inhibiting depression.²³ By understanding the effects of social capital, where it is declining, and how to reverse the drop, we can better organizations by affecting positive changes in a group’s norms.

The Army, the Profession, and Social Capital

Social capital strengthens two of the five essential characteristics of the Army Profession: *trust* and *esprit de corps*. In addition, the Army Culture spurs the growth of social capital within the Army Profession, breeding opportunities to use the norms of reciprocity, trust, pride, and mutual assistance. By understanding the Army’s social capital, its challenges, and its goals over the next decade, we can fortify the Army Profession.

Trust. Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey believes “trust is the cornerstone of our profession.”²⁴ Army Doctrine Reference Publication (ADRP) 1, *The Army Profession*, calls trust the “bedrock” of the profession. Trust creates the bonds necessary to strengthen relations among soldiers; leaders and soldiers; and soldiers, their families, and the Army, and to bridge with the American people. The trust advocated in ADRP 1 is the basis for creating strong units, with expected norms of the Army Ethic enhancing social trust. With each soldier trained under the same value system, others expect a certain behavior at work, at home, and in combat.²⁵ This creates a reliance on each other that supports the unit throughout all of its activities.

Many believe vertical organizations—like the Army’s chain of command—limit development of social capital.²⁶ While similar organizations lose social capital because of the coercion of a boss to employee environment, the Army’s emphasis on trust and mission command constrains this loss. Army leaders build trust through collective experiences requiring a team to overcome challenges together—leadership included.²⁷ If, as Colin Powell said, leaders know they must “accomplish the mission and look after the troops,” trust grows.²⁸ After a decade of war, soldiers do trust their leaders to accomplish the mission and look after them. In fact, 62 percent consider their leaders effective.²⁹ Beyond trust of leaders, mission command and its decentralized operations require a commander to trust subordinates to “perform with responsible initiative in complex, fast-changing, chaotic circumstances.”³⁰ This trust arises through decentralized training in similar environments where soldiers will see the trust placed in them by their leadership. Without this trust, the Army Profession is too vertical and fails to grow.

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The Army does not just desire trust within units; it also incorporates families. The norms of reciprocity are important in Army communities. With bases in smaller towns and isolation, compounded by the nature of the profession and combat, a strong support structure is required for families. Social trust grows between the family and the leadership of the unit through the family readiness groups, which provide “an avenue of mutual support and assistance.” This formal organization facilitates the development of social capital between all levels of a unit through reciprocity and uniting different families through a common bond.³¹ Morale, Welfare, and Recreation (MWR) programs further bridge families and soldiers from different units.³² A recent study demonstrated that use of MWR programs increased the desire to stay in the Army and satisfaction with Army life.³³ These programs enhance trust

because the Army becomes more than a paycheck; it is a family, community, and way of life.

With trust within the walls of Army bases, it is imperative for the profession to bridge with surrounding communities and the American people at large. Trust is “what binds us together—those that wear the uniform and those of you that serve in your communities,” stated Dempsey at the National League of Cities Congressional Cities Conference.³⁴ The American people place trust within the Army to support and defend the Constitution.³⁵ The military trusts their communities to support them and elect officials who decide on their use judiciously. However, building this trust goes beyond justly fighting and winning the nation’s wars; it requires a common understanding of each other through outreach. From the Hopkinsville, Ky., Kiwanis Club recognizing Fort Campbell soldiers to links on the Fort Drum homepage to community activities, bridging between the Army and the surrounding community occurs in a variety of ways.^{36 37} The formation of this social trust as the foundation of the Army Profession fosters the activity needed to create resilient and cohesive units.³⁸

Esprit de corps. Training and equipment only get a unit so far. The stresses of war, missing home, and fatigue wears “on even the most experienced Army professional” over time and requires a support network on top of the intrinsic motivation to continue performing.³⁹ As evidenced in the book *Black Hearts*, the burden of fighting for so long can cause too much strain despite the U.S. Army being among the “most-tested and best-behaved fighting forces in history.”⁴⁰ ADRP 1 emphasizes esprit de corps as a way to further resilience across all levels of the organization. Esprit de corps or “shared sense of purpose, strong bonds of loyalty and pride,” and resolve is necessary to accomplish missions and arises from the basic components of social capital.

Like trust, esprit de corps occurs at every level. Individually, esprit de corps happens through pride, shared values, and an attachment to the Army Profession. For esprit de corps to grow throughout the entire Army Profession, each individual must hold onto their morale. On a unit level, esprit de corps grows with each layer up the organizational chart. A small unit has a common sense of mission, shared experiences, and a set of norms that lead to pride in the organization and Army. The embodiment of this

pride at the team, squad, and platoon level can successfully transition the motivation to further the Army Profession by demonstrating to individuals that they are not alone. Items like call-signs, unit mottos, guidons, and patches all provide something for a soldier and unit to rally around.

Larger units expand upon small ones through open command climates, trust, and commitment. The Center for Army Leadership Annual Survey of Army Leadership (CASAL) demonstrates that 70 percent of the Army is satisfied with the amount of freedom they have in their job because of open command climates. This autonomy equates to increased trust, with 70 percent again viewing their immediate superior as effective in “establishing trusting relationships.”⁴¹ These large units then bridge esprit de corps to the entire Army and its community. Towns outside of military installations take pride in the unit living and training among them. This pride fosters a support network, spurs social capital, and demonstrates a future strength of the Army Profession.

Army culture. As a reflection of the Army Profession, both esprit de corps and trust influence Army Culture. Even with rotations of personnel, leaders, and missions, the Army Culture reflects the norms

informed from the Army Ethic and Profession. Three dimensions constitute culture: a professional identity, a sense of community, and hierarchy. Community here is imperative. Without social capital, there is no community, which is why an understanding of the role the Army Culture plays in the future of the profession is important.⁴²

Community creates a “professional family” and broadens identity beyond just the individual. By joining this group, there is the private good of individual growth while providing a public good to the rest of America.⁴³ The private good results from the basic benefits, like the GI Bill, health care, housing, and pay, along with the support structures one automatically joins when they serve. The public good is both the direct service of defending the nation against all enemies, and the externalities communities near military installations see with the influx of new individuals who broaden perspectives, provide financial benefits, and live among the civilian populace. This community fosters the growth of Army Culture, but if there is a decline in this sense of community among Army professionals, an associated decline in the Army culture will occur, limiting the Army Profession.



U.S. Army

The president of Barreto Group, Inc., Rodney Barreto, tries out a mine detector while being advised by Capt. Robert St. Claire, an instructor for the Joint Civilian Orientation Conference, during their visit to Fort Campbell, Ky., 22 September 2010.

The Army Profession requires trust and esprit de corps to develop itself and the Army Culture. Without either, the Army Profession does not exist. Social capital enhancement provides avenues through which units and leaders can foster social trust and pride, resulting in a prospering Army Profession.

The Army, the Profession, and the Impacts of Collapsing Social Capital

ADRP 1 relies heavily on components of social capital to develop the Army Profession. However, the problem is when structures designed to naturally create social capital disappear. Moreover, a decline in social capital nationally leads to a similar decrease in the military. The difference between a decline in the nation and decline in the Army is that the Army Profession relies on social capital to succeed and instill its values. Increasing numbers of suicide, sexual assault, and toxic leaders and decreasing interaction with the civilian population substantiates the Army's loss of social capital.

Limited mutual support and trust between soldiers. The rising number of suicides within the Army shows a breakdown in social capital. In 2012, the Army had 182 suicides, up from 166 in 2011.⁴⁴ These numbers follow a trend of increasing suicides over the past decade.⁴⁵ In spite of awareness and a plethora of prevention programs, this trend line shows that some units lack the norm of mutual support. While there is no definitive interpretation of the rise, social isolation is one plausible explanation. Putnam identifies similar suicide trends nationally, with individualism and a “weakened commitment” to organizations and groups isolating those prone to depression.⁴⁶ Without unit bonds, mutual support disappears. Without mutual support, soldiers must fight alone instead of as a team. Increasing social capital provides the networks and associated norms to create a commitment to organizations larger than oneself. Without social capital, reversing the suicide trend and increasing mutual support is difficult.

Furthering issues of trust at the individual soldier level, the Army reported 1,695 sexual assaults during fiscal year 2011 (combining restricted and unrestricted reports). The majority of these incidents involve junior enlisted soldiers in the

barracks.⁴⁷ With these acts occurring in a soldier and unit's home, it is nearly impossible to develop esprit de corps when individual members fear others at work and home. Any sexual assault is a breach of trust and leads to a diminished valuation of the Army Profession by both those within and those outside of the Army. Unless the trend of both suicides and sexual assault declines and social trust and mutual support increase, the Army Profession will struggle to remain strong.

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Breakdown in Leader Trust and Unit Pride

Another sign of declining social capital is the increase in toxic leaders, who act unethically, foster closed and poor command climates, blame others for their own problems, are overly critical, and avoid interacting with subordinates.⁴⁸ The CASAL found nearly one in five leaders rated as toxic. Most occurrences of toxic leadership are at the small-unit level, with junior officers rated least positively and company-level NCOs with the lowest average scores. In other words, the leaders closest to soldiers, those who interact with families, conduct training, and maintain soldier development, are those most likely to be toxic.⁴⁹

An open command climate of “candor, trust, and respect” is essential for esprit de corps—20 percent loss of this trust Army wide is frightening.⁵⁰ Toxic leaders hurt organizations. Unit cohesion through training disappears. Mutual support and reciprocity vanishes. The lack of trust and unit bonds limits the ability to accomplish the mission and maintain the standards of the Army Profession.⁵¹



(DOD)

Moreover, training is in jeopardy at the organizational level. Gen. Raymond Odierno testified to the Senate Armed Services Committee that current sequestration cuts will “curtail training for 80 percent of ground forces.” The opportunity to train consistently, become proficient at their mission, and foster norms of trust and mutual assistance in units with both good and bad leaders is disappearing at the same time combat missions are ending. Soldiers, leaders, and entire units will lose the chance to build the bonds required to maintain readiness as “our soldiers, our young men and women, are the ones who will pay the price, potentially with their lives,” according to Odierno.⁵² In addition, limited readiness results in a breach of trust with the American people. According to ADRP 1, social trust begins at the highest level, with the American people trusting that the Army will defend their nation, their values, and their future.⁵³ If the Army and the Army Profession are not ready to fight and defend the nation against all enemies, then the people’s trust of the profession is broken. Social trust makes bonds tighter. Poor leadership and an inability to build esprit de corps causes trust and bonds

to crumble, which challenges the Army Profession to develop the social capital required for its success over the next decade.

Limiting Bridges of Trust

Sequestration cuts further break down social capital bridging the Army Profession and the communities surrounding military installations. The Army is already a small percentage of the population. Social trust arises more from observed actions than personal interaction. As the Army draws down 80,000 troops to reach 490,000 by 2017, there is even less opportunity to interact.⁵⁴ Reports of sexual assaults, murders overseas, and other nefarious activities hurt this social trust. If the Army Profession is dependent on the trust of America’s citizens as its organizing principle, it must also recognize that Americans must interact and view the profession in a positive manner. This could be a challenge for the Army with communities near Army bases. Sequestration does not just affect those in uniform. As General Odierno testified, he has “directed an immediate hiring freeze,” will “furlough up to 251,000 civilians,” and “cuts in

depot maintenance will see 5,000 lose their jobs.”⁵⁵ Each lost job affects a family and diminishes both interaction and mutual support—support necessary to maintain social capital and the Army Profession going forward. Each negative impact on the community weakens the bonds between the Army and the surrounding area. Each broken bond harms trust and the Army Profession.

These challenges are daunting. Attempts to mitigate the rise in suicides and sexual assaults make small improvements, but nothing to stem the lost social capital. Lowered esprit de corps starts to change a unit’s culture. Reversing changes are tough, despite the impact those changes have on the Army Profession. Finally, the Army Profession needs to foster trust with the American people. Limited interaction and job losses hurt trust and the Army Profession. Still, these challenges are far from insurmountable.

Meeting the Challenge of Declining Social Capital

ADRP 1 outlines both requirements for and methods by which the Army Profession can face the challenge of declining social capital. Individual actions alone cannot overcome this loss. However, collective action and policies that foster similar activities can. Groups must come together and work to improve their social networks, norms of reciprocity, and trust by preventing the loss of social capital (See Figure 1). With each challenge identified earlier, the outcome is the same if no changes happen—a weak Army Profession. Addressing each issue that weakens social capital maintains the positive direction of the Army

Profession. The steps and the process to maintain the strength of the Army Profession is what requires creativity in leadership, policy, and individual actors within units.

Create a place. First, creating a place outside of work develops social capital within organizations. At Fort Bliss, spaces for soldiers to interact with others builds bonds within and among units. A typical soldier’s day begins at 0630 and ends 12 hours later. Their home is the barracks and their kitchen is a dining facility, where they share a table with their peers from work. If the Army Profession relies on the workplace to foster social capital, the bonds are shallow if there is no interaction among unit members outside of work. A space or place encourages gathering and additional norms of reciprocity to grow. These places unite soldiers and create interactions away from work, televisions, and social media, improving social trust. The bonds made in these places are voluntary and provide the mutual support that can maintain or improve social capital and thus the Army Profession.

Enduring units. The second recommendation is to build enduring units. While career gates and timelines are important, building unit cohesion takes time. Dissolving leadership and moving jobs immediately following a deployment or long training exercise splinters the bonds that took so long to develop. Social trust erodes, unit pride is hard to find, and support structures lost.⁵⁶ This process has a cost beyond the dollars it takes to retrain new members of the unit. Organizational knowledge disappears. The emotional cost of creating new bonds causes some to struggle.

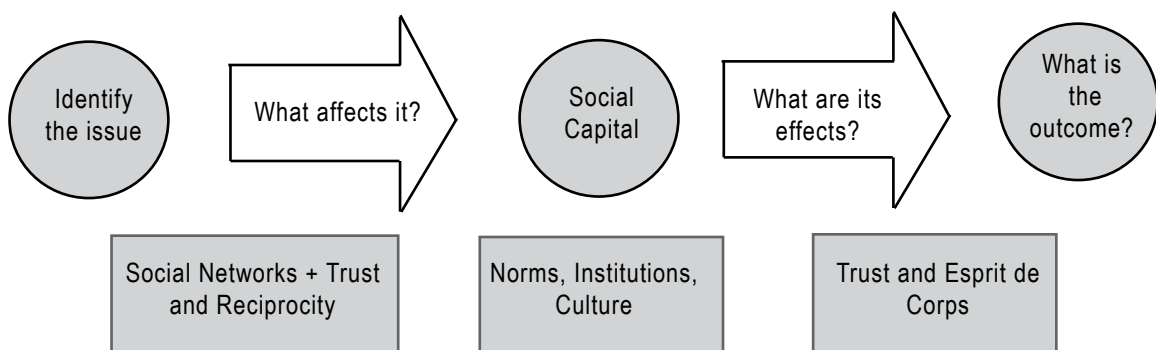


Figure 1



Soldiers of the 4th Battalion, 118th Infantry Regiment, South Carolina Army National Guard, watch television in the battalion's dayroom at Camp Buehring, Kuwait, following the facility's opening on 25 August 2012. (U.S. Army)

Maintaining longevity and the associated norms developed within units matters.⁵⁷ Adjusting career timelines, establishing home stations, and providing predictability to permanent change of station moves builds a culture within the Army Profession that develops social capital. Slowing changes of duty station and leadership preserves bonds and builds more esprit de corps. With longevity in units, families are stable and can develop trust in individual leaders along with the Army as an organization, which strengthens the bonds between the Army Profession and its families. Moreover, units filled with already established esprit de corps counter toxic leaders. Pride and trust between various junior leaders and

soldiers are strong, and long established relationships minimize a toxic leader's impact more than if the unit's bonds were weak and easily broken. By keeping organizations together longer, soldiers, families, and units can continue to build the ties required to cultivate social trust, unit pride, and social capital. In other words, to strengthen the Army Profession, keep people together.

Break down barriers. Bridging social capital requires the Army Profession to break down barriers between it and the nation it serves. Since 9/11, increased force protection measures built up the walls around Army installations. Americans could not get on military installations to interact with soldiers and Army leaders. There was no bridging. There was only isolation. The Army Profession separated itself from whom it served. The citizens who trusted their defense to the Army Profession no longer understood the force. Social networks and norms of reciprocity disappeared.

Through open posts like Fort Bliss and the U.S. Military Academy, along with community wide events hosted by garrison commands and local leaders, bridging occurs. As the social capital increases between society and the Army, the outcome is an enhanced view of the Army Profession by more Americans, along with improved opportunities for support networks for Army professionals.

Social capital will form naturally if the Army Profession sustains its strength over the next decade. However, the challenge is to stem the breaches of trust before social capital, and with it, the Army Profession, erodes. Understanding the factors that hinder social capital and adjusting policies and leadership to cultivate bonds and norms of reciprocity associated with social networks will develop social capital and the Army Profession. **MR**

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