



Relationships between Soldiers of different grades may conflict with Army Regulation 600-20, chapter 4, which sets limits on business and personal relationships. Would a shift in the fraternization policy better support personnel while leading to other positive outcomes, such as better recruitment and retention numbers? (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)

# An Ethical View of Inappropriate Relationships

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**T**he Army's rules, policies, regulations, governing doctrines, and flowcharts guide Soldiers through decision-making, ways to think, how to implement ideas, and principles to embody. These guidelines provide baseline standards for our profession and codify shared belief systems through a common language.

U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command portrays this literature as descriptive rather than prescriptive (Department of the Army [DA], 2023). These documents raise ethical questions regarding the relevancy of specific verbiage and if they violate civil rights.

Army Regulation 600-20, chapters 4-14 through 4-16 illuminate how the Army views relationships between Soldiers of varying grades and the consequences of fraternization (DA, 2020). This article

explores how the regulations are antiquated, rooted in tradition, and negatively impact organizations. They must change. The U.S. Army needs to update its culture and perspective on relationships.

## The Problem

While the Army strives to stay at the tip of the spear with the latest technology and advancements to compete globally, it often lacks social and emotional intelligence regarding its Soldiers' needs. It restricts activities between officers, noncommissioned officers (NCOs), and Soldiers, including business and personal relationships (DA, 2020). AR 600-20 further requires relationships to terminate or necessitates marriage if promotion or career advancement violates the regulation, regardless of

organization and service affiliation (DA, 2020).

Unnecessary language further highlights the need for change when serving in organizations where developing relationships with adjacent staff sections is required for effective team building and success. The Army Values address good order and discipline issues concerning inappropriate relationships, so what specific problem does the Army's stance on restricting relationships solve?

Dominant and successful American businesses such as Amazon, Google, and Facebook have more liberal policies regarding personal relationships spanning even greater personnel numbers than the U.S. Army (Zipkin, 2018).

The Army's steadfast values and commitment to professionalism should underpin its approach to relationships.

AR 600-20's overly restrictive verbiage on fraternization is redundant with the Army Values described in Army Doctrine Publication 6-22. It defines the Army Values through the LDRSHIP acronym and further discusses ethics and what it means to be trusted professionals (DA, 2019).

The descriptive nature of the Army Values, more aptly named virtues, casts a wide net that applies to other doctrine and policies beyond fraternization. Further, Army Values also serve as a metric to evaluate officers and NCOs throughout their careers, eliminating the need to restrict or prohibit relationships of specific grades.

## How It Impacts the Army

Service members, particularly young Soldiers, face ethical dilemmas when pursuing meaningful personal, business, or romantic relationships. Certain relationships may violate Army regulations and are punishable by the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ).

The median age of marriage in the U.S. is 28 for women and 30 for men (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). According to U.S. Army age demographics, 45 percent of active duty Soldiers are under 25 years old and 21 percent are between 26 and 30 (Department of Defense, 2020).

They show 66 percent or two-thirds of Army active-duty personnel are the prime age for dating and marriage. Furthermore, a *Forbes Advisor* poll ("Workplace Romance," 2023) identified that more than 60 percent of adults have engaged in a workplace romance, and Soldiers will inevitably engage in this behavior.

Young Soldiers may hide their relationships, risking

reprimand or potentially being discharged from the Army, hurting the already dismal retention and recruiting numbers (DA, n.d.). The Army's choice to restrict and forbid relationships, harshly compared to civilian companies, further inhibits sustaining a healthy force.

## Root Cause of the Problem

Historically, the Department of Defense (DoD) punishes service members under Article 134 and Article 92 of the UCMJ for fraternization, regardless of rank or grade (DoD, 2023). Nevertheless, the Army's fraternization policy is the most restrictive.

At its core, the policy is based on tradition and the desire to detach and separate officers and enlisted personnel, creating an unnecessary and inefficient dichotomy. In contrast, Marine Corps and Air Force policies focus on the effects of relationships on an organization more than the specific individuals involved (Kageleiry, n.d.).

Additionally, the Navy released a memorandum on fraternization for its members operating within U.S. Special Operations Command premised on the idea that traditions and customs form

the basis of relationships (USSOCOM, n.d.).

Disturbingly, *The Center for Junior Officers* published an article on avoiding fraternization and recommended eliminating interactions with Soldiers and NCOs outside of unit functions (Plaziak, n.d.).

Holding onto and fostering a deliberate caste system or disparaging literature toward NCOs is not only counterproductive but directly opposes the Army Values.

## Proposed Solution

Analyzing Army demographics, believing in individuals' pursuit of happiness, and the current struggles with recruiting and retention necessitate a prompt change in the Army's fraternization views.

The most efficient adjustment consists of updating AR 600-20 and removing specific verbiage prohibiting personal, business, or romantic relationships between Soldiers – including the requirements to terminate or marry in the event of career progression.

Removing this verbiage brings the Army to modern comparable business practices and ethics while, most importantly, not risking or removing commanders' authority to maintain good order and discipline within



Becoming a noncommissioned officer limits relationships or puts them on hold due to the Army's fraternization policy. Soldiers may choose to hide activities, risking reprimand or discharge. (U.S. Army photo by Spc. David Campos-Contreras)



their organizations. Organizational leaders can then manage personal relationships appropriately, as seen in other professions, by requiring Soldiers to disclose them. UCMJ Articles 92 and 134 provide sufficient leeway and corrective action if personal relationships hinder military operations or damage a unit's climate.

Furthermore, ADP 6-22 remains a reliable reference and guideline for adhering to the Army Values, which are the foundation of appropriate relationships, professional or otherwise. The recommended change also keeps regulation more descriptive than prescriptive, narrowing the gap between the officers and enlisted.

With modern institutional knowledge and access to higher education because of funding and online schooling, NCOs have significantly closed the education gap, which has historically been a discriminator between officers and enlisted Soldiers.

The leader development model's lifelong learning section recommends finishing a bachelor's degree while serving as a sergeant first class and a master's degree as a sergeant major (Army Career Tracker, 2023). Regardless of the level of parity, without acknowledging these differences and taking proactive steps to foster growth and development as an organization, the chasm between officers and enlisted Soldiers will remain.

The Army is familiar with leading organizations through change. Tom Galvin (2023) published his tools for leading change within military organizations. Yvonne Doll and Billy Miller (2007) extrapolate the Kotter Model as it applies to military organizations in the current curriculum taught at Army institutions.

Remaining flexible and adaptable is critical to a growing organization's success, and the Army must continuously evolve to stay relevant in global power competition. Adjusting the culture and reducing the stigma of relationships between officers and enlisted Soldiers is a step in the right direction.

### Three Ethical Lenses

ADP 6-22 and AR 600-20 illuminate the need for ethics in decision-making, adherence to the Army Values, and stewardship of the profession. However, they are broad and fall short of how to address ethical issues or dilemmas.

A U.S. Army Command and General Staff College supervisory professor clarified decision-making through three ethical lenses he called the ethical triangle (Kem, n.d.). Leaders must incorporate various perspectives to frame their thinking while making ethical decisions (Kem, n.d.). The ethical triangle guides and assists people in making complex ethical choices and becoming ethical leaders.



To comply with Army regulations, Soldiers might need to choose between getting married or ending a relationship after a promotion. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)

### Principles

Principle-based ethics, made famous by Immanuel Kant and Thomas Hobbes, focuses on outcomes following a value-based or rule-based system, such as the Army Values or the Constitution (Kem, n.d.). Fraternization described in AR 600-20, while based on values, undermines the fulfillment of living by those values, consequently leading Soldiers to believe that having certain personal relationships conflicts with those beliefs.

Anecdotally, these relationships occur far more frequently than reported, placing Soldiers in ethical dilemmas that violate integrity and are contrary to a principles-based ethical decisions. It is a moot point if Soldiers adhere to the values and virtues instilled throughout their military careers.

### Consequences

Consequences-based ethics align with creating the best possible solution for the greatest number of people (Kem, n.d.). With two-thirds of the Soldier population of marriage and dating age, it is clear most Soldiers would benefit from a more liberal policy.

Despite the belief that a stringent fraternization policy fosters a more professional organization, most young Soldiers are in their prime for dating and marriage. So, policy must shift to align with contemporary and comparable business practices.

Such an adjustment would represent a sound, consequential-based ethical decision. In the event of discrepancies or violations, commanders and the Army have the means to discipline and reprimand Soldiers. They can hold violators accountable while maintaining good order and discipline.

### Virtues

Virtues-based ethics was the first ethics theory developed by Plato and Aristotle. Centering on



The Army's fraternization policy detaches and separates officers and enlisted personnel, making some constructive dialogue among Soldiers verboten. (AI image generated by NCO Journal staff)

individual character and the desirable virtues individuals possess, it is also known as the golden rule of respecting others (Kem, n.d.). Through a virtues lens, the prominent policy change analysis is altruistic, where individuals are free to pursue happiness.

Again, current policy relies on tradition, dictating interpersonal relationships and assuming they will negatively impact good order and discipline. The

Army has come a long way with civil rights regarding marriage; it is time to take the next step and apply this logic and respect for individual choice and pursuit of happiness to the fraternization policy.

## Conclusion

The ethical analysis of inappropriate relationships in Army organizations reveals the need for shifts in policy and perspective. The fraternization policy is outdated, rooted in tradition, and infringes on individual rights.

The proposed solution involves updating AR 600-20, removing specific restrictive verbiage, and aligning the Army's stance with modern business practices and ethics. This change promotes a more inclusive and adaptable culture, reducing the unnecessary dichotomy between officers and enlisted personnel while maintaining commanders' authority.

By embracing a more liberal approach, the Army can better support its personnel and address the realities of inevitable relationships. As the Army continues to evolve, adapting its culture and policies is crucial for remaining relevant in the ever-changing global power competition. ■

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