Research Note

Conceptualizing the Civil–Military Gap: A Research Note

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Abstract
The authors suggest that scholars mean very different things when they refer to the civil–military gap. To illustrate the point, the authors conceptualize the gap in terms of four distinct ideal types and show that scholars have referred to each variant as *the* civil–military gap at different times. Though the authors recognize that the four ideal types—cultural, demographic, policy preference, and institutional—are not always mutually exclusive, the authors suggest that they are divergent enough to warrant consideration as distinct variants and that their specification can enhance the civil–military relations literature by helping scholars identify and untangle the causes and effects of the gap.

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Introduction

Decades ago, Samuel P. Huntington and Morris Janowitz recognized a growing divide between an increasingly conservative officer corps and the American public.[1] While Huntington underscored the value of the armed forces as a separate society based on distinct values, Janowitz believed that the divergence among military and civilian cultures could diminish the military's responsiveness to civilian leadership. More recently, Charles Dunlap, Richard Kohn, Peter Feaver, Deborah Avant, Elliot Cohen, Thomas Ricks and others reinvigorated the civil–military gap debate during the 1990s, a decade characterized by a great deal of friction between military and civilian leadership.[2] A well-known study by Feaver, Kohn, and their colleagues at the Triangle Institute of Strategic Studies (TISS) added flesh to the bones of the gap debate by providing a great deal of empirical evidence, reaching a range of conclusions about the magnitude and effects of the gap.[3] After 9/11, scholars revisited the gap debate and again raised questions about the convergence of civilian and military viewpoints.[4] As of yet, no consensus has been reached.[5]

Among those scholars who argue that a divide does in fact separate civilian society from the military, almost everyone believes that it is important. The gap has been cited as a determinant of American foreign policy and the propensity to use force.[6] It is said to have implications for hot-button issues such as the fairness of the All-Volunteer Force (AVF), the role of women in the military, and the question of whether gay men and lesbians should serve openly.[7] Some have even gone so far as to suggest that the gap poses significant dangers for the stability of civil–military relations and the robustness of democracy itself.[8] Despite the prevalence of claims about serious implications of the gap, we suggest that scholars have failed to clarify how best to conceptualize it and that they sometimes reference quite distinct phenomena when they discuss the civil–military gap. If scholars were more explicit about their conceptualizations of the gap, they could sharpen debates about its causes and effects.

As a first step in this direction, we argue that the civil–military gap can be conceptualized in terms of four distinct variants and that while the variants overlap somewhat, they are divergent enough to warrant consideration as distinct ideal types. We distinguish, in particular, among four different types of civil–military gaps: (1) cultural; (2) demographic; (3) policy preference; and (4) institutional. Before describing each ideal type, we address other projects in the civil–military relations literature which introduce distinctions into the characterization of civil–military relations.

Extant Approaches in the Literature

Although scholars mean very different things when they refer to the civil–military gap, we are unable to find any typologies that distinguish among different types of gaps. For example, Avant distinguishes among three standards for assessing the

health of the civil–military relationship: whether the military has an influence on policy; whether the military is representative of society; and whether tensions characterize the civil–military relationship.[9] While Avant's distinctions are extremely useful for determining whether the civil–military relationship is in crisis, making that assessment is not the same as characterizing what the relationship is—in other words whether or not there is a gap. One can imagine civil–military relationships characterized by a large gap and high crisis, large gap/low crisis, small gap/high crisis, and small gap/low crisis. One anonymous reviewer of this article suggested that there is no difference between Avant's project and ours, but we would respond that it is precisely that conflation which underscores the importance of conceptualizing the civil–military gap in more nuanced ways. Not only is the question of whether there is a gap distinct from whether the civil–military relationship is healthy, but the determination of *whether* a gap *might* undermine or promote the health of the relationship depends critically on being clear about what one means by the "civil–military gap."

To take another example, Cohen identifies three patterns of civil–military relations: (1) the relationship between military and societal values and culture, (2) the degree of autonomy that the military has from civilian institutional interference, and (3) the question of whether military or civilian leaders are more influential in shaping policy, particularly in regard to decisions concerning the use of force.[10] While Cohen's first and second patterns somewhat echo two of our four ideal types, his conceptual lens is more oriented to ascertaining who is behind the wheel of military policy than it is to determining whether or not there is a gap. With respect to values, for example, Cohen's question is whether civilian values influence military culture. With respect to institutions, Cohen's question is whether military institutions are free from the interference of courts, newspapers, and other civilian institutions. And with respect to leadership, Cohen asks whether military or civilian leaders have the most determinative impact on policy. As was the case with Avant, we suggest that the question of who has more sway over military policy is distinct from whether there is a gap. For example, one can imagine civil–military relationships characterized by a big gap and high military influence on policy, big gap/low influence, small gap/high influence, and small gap/low influence. Again echoing our response to Avant, we would suggest that to determine *whether* a gap *might* be the cause or effect of the degree of civilian influence depends critically on being clear about what one means by the "civil–military gap."

Four Civil–Military Gaps

Given the absence of, and need for, typologies which distinguish among different types of civil–military gaps, we turn to the elaboration of our four ideal types. The cultural gap refers to whether the attitudes and values of civilian and military populations differ. Thomas Ricks, for example, identifies a striking cultural gap in interviews with Marines. After spending eleven weeks at boot camp, the Marines return home on leave and experience a "private loathing for public America." This

attitude stems from the Marines' repulsion of "the physical unfitness of civilians, by the uncouth behavior they witnessed, and by what they saw as pervasive selfishness and consumerism."[11] The Marines' distaste of civilian culture establishes a dichotomy between military life, which exhorts unity, discipline, and sacrifice, and the civilian life of individuality, hedonism, and self-gain.[12] Such patterns may characterize the attitudes of the officer corps as well. Feaver and Kohn note that military elites view civilian society as morally corrupt and see the military as a potentially powerful means of reforming such corruption. While civilian elites generally agree that society is corrupt, they disagree that the military should have any role in moral reform.[13] Parallel to such antipathy, a lack of trust sometimes characterizes relations among military and civilian leaders. This rift is evident in the comments of Lt. Gen. Ronald Kadish, who remarked in 2000 that many in the Pentagon considered the Office of the Secretary of Defense as "the enemy."[14]

A second, demographic, gap refers to whether or not the military represents the US population in its partisan and socioeconomic makeup. With the end of conscription and the rise of the AVF, the armed forces seem less able to mirror the demographic composition of civilian society than was the case in previous eras when a draft was in effect. Because the military draws on narrow segments of society to fill its ranks, sharp demographic differences may distinguish civilian from military populations. Politically, some studies find that up to 60 percent of service members identify as Republicans, whereas only 13 percent identify as Democrats.[15] Surveys conducted by former Army Major Dana Isaacoff conclude that at the US Military Academy at West Point, "being Republican is becoming part of the definition of being a military officer."[16] That said, Dempsey argues that the numbers of Democrats and Republicans among enlisted Army personnel are about the same. Among the public at large, Democrats outnumber Republicans slightly.[17] Interestingly, Isaacoff finds that one of the last bastions of liberalism in the officer corps is the "colonels and generals, perhaps because they began their careers in the draft-era military."[18]

The military also tends to draw disproportionately from conservative Southern states and rural areas, a trend that was exacerbated by the closing of bases in the northeast and west during the Clinton Administration.[19] In turn, social and economic elites tend to be under-represented in the military.[20] The majority of new recruits have fathers who are veterans, and fewer members of the military come from nonmilitary families.[21] As a result of these and other factors, the educational attainment of the troops does not reflect civilian trends.[22] And, perhaps because the propensity to serve in the military decreases as educational attainment increases, military recruitment efforts at historically liberal university campuses are reduced, as fewer college graduates enlist in the military.[23] On the other hand, the upper echelons of the military are, on average, more educated than their civilian counterparts, with a significant number of military elites possessing postgraduate degrees.[24] Other elements of the demographic gap include race and gender. Comparing the military to national census figures, racial minorities are overrepresented among enlisted personnel, and

Table 1. The Four Dimensions of the Civil–Military Gap

Gap Type	Cultural Gap	Demographics Gap	Policy Preference Gap	Institutional Gap
Description	Value differences between military and civilian populations	Differences in the composition of the military and civilian populations	Differences in the policy objectives pursued by military and civilian elites	Differences between military and civilian institutions
Key variables	Mutual perceptions, norm socialization processes, organizational path dependencies	Geographical origins, ethnicity, political affiliation, socioeconomic or family background	Expressed policy preferences, rational gain divergences, historical and entrenched preferences	Functional differences, institutional identities, myths, and prejudices

underrepresented in the officer corps.[25] While women comprise about half of the civilian population, they make up only about 15 percent of the military.

Third, scholars debate whether a policy preference gap separates military and civilian elites who may agree or disagree about a range of public policy issues. Interestingly, as Patricia Shields notes, the potential for a policy gap is rooted in the paradox that "the institution created to protect the polity must become powerful enough to threaten the polity."[26] The military's power to threaten the polity, combined with its unique role in protecting national security, gives rise to a distinct set of organizational interests that can prompt senior officers to prefer policies that differ from those favored by civilians. Gelpi and Feaver, for example, find that elite civilian leaders with prior military experience hold views on military involvement that accord more closely with elite military leaders than do the views of elite civilian leaders with no record of military service.[27] These differences in experience between civilian and military elites can lead to differences in policy preferences: military elites believe that US military forces should be deployed strictly for reasons of Realpolitik, and that when employed, the use of force should be overwhelming. In contrast, elite civilian leaders lacking military experience tend to prefer limited, interventionist engagements centered on humanitarian and peacekeeping efforts.[28] Consistent with this perspective, some argue that the dwindling percentage of members of Congress with military experience has exacerbated the policy preference gap in recent decades.[29]

The fourth type of civil–military gap, which we refer to as the institutional gap, concerns whether the relationship between the military and civilian institutions such as the media, the courts, and the education system can be characterized in terms of harmony or conflict (Table 1). For example, following the expansion of the doctrine

of judicial deference to the military by the Rehnquist court, some scholars have argued that federal judges are increasingly prone to accept and even encourage military interpretations on a range of constitutional questions.[30] Other observers point to judicial activism, which, they say, can be directed against the military in some cases.[31] In the realm of education, some analysts point to the increasing presence of Junior Reserve Officers Training Corps (JROTC) programs on high school campuses,[32] while others emphasize antimilitary protests organized by some teachers, students, and administrators.[33] Observers on the left have suggested that the media has become increasingly militarized after 9/11, while those on the right have questioned the patriotism of the mainstream media as well as its support for the troops and the war in Iraq.[34] All of these and other, closely related questions refer to the presence and magnitude of the institutional gap.

Conclusion

The literature on the civil–military gap continues to grow and to spark new debates in a variety of subfields. Due to ongoing and even increasing interest in civil–military relations, it has become important for scholars to clarify the framework from which debates are constructed. As a starting point for this endeavor, we suggest that specifying distinct conceptualizations of the gap could improve the literature about the gap's causes and effects. Ironically, even though scholars imply that they are addressing the same civil–military gap as one another, sometimes they address quite different phenomena. We hope that our typology of four civil–military gaps can aid in understanding disparate approaches that scholars take when engaging in debates about the military–civilian divide, but we do not suggest that our four variants are exhaustive. Future research could focus, for example, on other variants of the civil–military gap that may be found outside of American politics. Though our discussion focuses on a mostly American conversation, analysis of civil–military relations in other countries could suggest alternative ideal types that may or may not be salient in the American political context.

As a final comment, we suggest that a healthy debate about the civil–military gap is as relevant today as it has ever been. While some scholars believe that this debate has become outdated, former US Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates recently reminded US Military Academy graduates about the importance of the issue. In a speech delivered on April 21, 2008, at West Point, Gates encouraged tomorrow's officers to ''tell the truth'' to both military and civilian leaders. However, he also cautioned that that while respectful dissent is critical, disagreements should be kept private and expressed through official channels.[35] Gates' advice serves as a reminder about the importance of managing tensions that may arise between the military and civilian realms. As long as those tensions persist, the debate over the civil–military gap will continue.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

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2. See, for example, Charles J. Dunlap Jr., "The Origins of the American Military Coup of 2012," *Parameters* 22, 4 (1992–93): 2-20; Richard H. Kohn, "Out of Control: The Crisis of Civil-Military Relations," *The National Interest* 35 (1994): 3-17; Eliot A. Cohen, "Playing Powell Politics: The General's Zest for Power," *Foreign Affairs* 74 (1995): 102-10; Deborah Avant, "Are the Reluctant Warriors Out of Control? Why the U.S. Military Is Averse to Responding to Post–Cold War Low-Level Threats," *Security Studies* 6 (1996/1997): 2; Deborah Avant and James Lebovic, "U.S. Military Attitudes Toward Post–Cold War Missions," *Armed Forces & Society* 27, 1 (2000); and Deborah Avant, "Conflicting Indicators of 'Crisis' in American Civil-Military Relations," *Armed Forces & Society* 24, 3 (1998): 375-88.

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9. Avant, ''Conflicting Indicators.''

10. Cohen, ''Why the Gap Matters''; Cohen, Supreme Command.

11. Thomas Ricks, ''The Widening Gap Between Military and Society,'' *The Atlantic Monthly*, July (1997): 66-78.

12. Ibid., 69.

13. Peter D. Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, ''Project on the Gap between the Military and Civilian Society: Digest of Findings and Studies.'' Paper presented at The Conference on the Military and Civilian Society, October 1999.

14. Ronald T. Kadish [Lt. Gen., USAF], Director, Ballistic Missile Defense Organization, ''Remarks,'' December 6, 2000, Space and Missile Defense Symposium and Exhibition, Association of the United States Army, El Paso, Texas. See Richard H. Kohn, ''The Erosion of Civilian Control of the Military in the United States Today,'' *Naval War College Review* 55 (2002): note 101.

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16. Dana Isascoff, ''Civil-Military Relations'' (talk presented at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, MA, February 14, 1996).

17. Rosa Brooks, ''Uncle Sam to Liberals: I need you!'' *Los Angeles Times*, August 13, 2005.

18. Ibid.

19. Ricks, ''The Widening Gap between Military and Society,'' 66-78.

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21. Wrona claims that as the number of veterans has steadily declined since the Vietnam war, this group has comprised a very small percentage of the population alluded to above. See Richard M. Wrona Jr., ''A Dangerous Separation: The Schism between American Society and its Military,'' *World Affairs* 169 (2006): 29; Ricks, ''The Widening Gap Between Military and Society,'' 66-78.

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26. Patricia M. Shields, "Civil-Military Relations: Changing Frontiers," *Public Administration Review* 66 (2006): 924-28.

27. Christopher Gelpi and Peter D. Feaver, "Speak Softly and Carry a Big Stick? Veterans in the Political Elite and the American Use of Force," *American Political Science Review* 96 (2002): 779-93; Peter D. Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, *Choosing Your Battles: American Civil-Military Relations and the Use of Force* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

28. Throughout history until present, US military officials have viewed the defense of US commercial interests as "interventionist" issues rather than as matters of "national security." See Gelpi and Feaver, "Speak Softly and Carry a Big Stick? Veterans in the Political Elite and the American Use of Force," 779-793.

29. Ricks, "The Widening Gap Between Military and Society," 66-78.

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35. Thom Shanker, "Defense Chief Advises Cadets on Disagreeing with Leaders," *New York Times*, April 22, 2008; Robert M. Gates, "Defense Secretary Gates' Speech at West Point," April 21, 2008. U.S. Department of Defense website http://www.defenselink. mil/speeches/speech.aspx?speechid=1232.

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