

ICT and Social Networks in a ‘Total Institution’: A Qualitative Study of Indian Military

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Abstract

Social networks in a ‘total institution’ strengthen not only members’ professional performance but also provide a substitution for family and kinship relations. The emergence of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), however, has transformed the contours of social ties in the military institution. Much discussion surrounds the issue of intimate inter-personal relationships between soldiers due to the nature of the task assigned them. It has been argued that soldiers’ ever-increasing use of ICT could negatively affect their social networks within the military institution. The present paper is born out of a field-based study among 100 rank-and-file soldiers of the Indian Air Force (IAF). This paper critically examines emerging trends in soldiers’ inter-personal social networks and their consequences on military cohesion in the backdrop of the ICT revolution. Findings that emerged out of the study revealed that soldiers’ long-distance networks have strengthened but their social networks with peers have weakened in the sense that their inter-personnel networks and cohesion were situation-based rather than professional. Individualism is taking place of group ties and their inter-personal networks are more oriented towards professionalism which lacks any kind of emotional attachment or sentiments of belonging.

Keywords: ICT, military, social networks, total institution, soldier

1. Introduction

Social networks or social relationships refer to a set of all direct and indirect relationships (connections) that an actor has with other people or groups in society. These ties may be based on caste, class, ethnicity, kinship relations, peer groups, and professional networks. They are the smallest observable units of social behaviour and are governed by the social structure of the society or organization (Blau 1974). The Military’s organizational structure encourages, what Simmel (1955) called, ‘premodern’ social networks which are encapsulating and confronting but often intolerant of outsiders (Blau 1974, Giddens 1990). These networks provide a sense of security and solidarity, which minimizes psychological ‘tensions’ for the majority of its members at the cost of subordination of their freedom and individual identity.

The military is a ‘greedy institution’ as it always demands a lot from its members (soldiers). Soldiers are on permanent round the clock duty, they have to stay away from mainstream society and culture (even from their spouse and children, if needed), ready for deployment on very short notice, and even be willing for supreme sacrifice for the sake of their group or country (Segal 1986). This requires a distinct social structure in the

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military. Social structure in the military represents a contradiction to the basic arrangement of the modern society where actors or individuals tend to work, play and sleep at different places with different people under different authorities, and this is executed without any rational plan (Goffman 1961). In the military, however, this barrier has been broken down, and above mentioned three aspects soldier's life are carried out at the same place within the camp with the same actors in a predetermined schedule fixed by the higher authorities with the help of rules and regulations. This centralized lifestyle is known as the military's way of life (Huntington 1957, Parmar 1994, Murray 1999, Burk 2008). It is the outcome of the nature and the task assigned to them. Modern militaries are largely raised and maintained by the States as a primary institution for territorial protection of the country which puts greater emphasis on the peer group networks than any other group or institution in the society (Homans 1946). Military, in the battle, can sustain itself only so long as individual soldiers are committed to the collective goals even at the cost of their injury or death. This is achieved through strong peer group networks which are known as social cohesion or cohesion in the military.

Cohesion is most often described as the quality of ties between soldiers in a military unit that influences the achievement of unit goals and members' performance (UziBen-Shalom et al. 2005). It is the outcome of primary or face-to-face networks within a small unit or, informal terms, horizontal ties. Military group cohesion consists of four interrelated, interacting, components based on different structural relationships: peer (horizontal), leader (vertical), organizational, and institutional bonding. Peer or horizontal bonding prevails among the members at the same hierarchy levels; however, leader or vertical bonding is between those at different levels. Peer and leader bonding within a small group together compose primary group cohesion. Organizational bonding is the bonding between personnel and their next higher organizations while institutional bonding can be defined as the bonding between personnel and their military branch. Together, organizational and institutional bonding composes secondary group cohesion. Each type of bonding has been considered to have two aspects: affective (emotional/reactive) and instrumental (an action/proactive) side. The concept of secondary group cohesion is of recent origin and it is an extension of research on primary group cohesion.

Existing literature on the topic suggests that there has been a steady stream of research on the social networks in the military since early empirical studies have shown that cohesion among the soldiers, particularly during war, rests on concrete and primary experiences of primary group networks than their ideological beliefs on the military or the war (Homans 1946, Stauffer et al. 1949, McNeill 1997). Cohesion is the outcome of military drill, which is a kind of 'muscular bonding' on the outgrowth of the practice of the military drill together (McNeill 1997) and has direct and positive connections with the bonding among the men in men only peer groups (Rosen et al. 2003). Shils and Janowitz (1984) argued that for the German soldiers' capacity of their immediate unit, their company, and platoon, to meet their need for food and shelter, affection and esteem were more important than Nazi ideology during the World War II. Skagge (1997) and others (Rosen et al. 2003, King 2007, Burk 2008) also reveal that social cohesion is a product of personal networks forged exclusive informal interactions, and combat effectiveness is closely related to men bonding.

Wong (2006) differentiated between primary and secondary cohesion. He (ibid.) argued that successful unit performance is determined by the personal networks rather than the task cohesion. McCoun et al. (2006) blamed Wong (2006) for ignoring a large body of empirical research and lack of methodological support for their research. UziBen-Shalom et al. (2005), however, revealed that soldiers' performance in the battle is the outcome of task cohesion rather than social networks. Cohesion can be developed through collective training and operational practices rather than through an effective process of social identification. McCoun et al. (2006) and King (2007) also argued that social networks can be developed and maintained, among the soldiers, through a collective drill. Drill inculcates commitment among soldiers to achieve similar professional goals rather than purely relying on the personnel bonding for the same. Siebold (2007) presented a contradictory view. His

ethnographic study found that the essence of peer networks is based on trust and teamwork among soldiers. His standard model of military group networks has four types of networks namely: peer (horizontal), leader (vertical), organizational, and institutional. Burk (2008) described later two networks as esprit-de-corps.

There is disagreement among scholars on the need for peer-group primary social networks among the soldiers for military effectiveness. There is also a lack of empirical studies on the topic from an Indian perspective. Moreover, the findings of empirical studies conducted in the US and the European countries may not be useful in the Indian perspective due to wide cultural, social, and economic differences between India and western countries. Hence, there is an urgent need for investigation on the centrality of social networks among Indian rank and file soldiers. The present paper is an endeavour of the researcher to fill this gap. This study will provide impetus to this neglected field of study and will contribute to the body of knowledge. It also investigates the ways and means through which peer, group, social networks emerge among the soldiers from different cultures, ethnicity, and language. And finally, how and in what ways these soldiers negotiate between their peer group social networks within a military station and long-distance networks with the family, relatives, and friends in the background of the ICT revolution.

2. Methods and Materials of the Study

This paper is based on the qualitative sociological study conducted on the Personnel Below Officer Ranks (PBORs) soldiers, commonly known as air warriors or airmen, of the Indian Air Force (IAF). The empirical data was collected in two phases. At the outset, after an extensive review of the relevant literature, a draft interview schedule was prepared and tested on twenty-five air warriors. This pilot study enabled the researcher to omit some double-barrelled, ambiguous, and repetitive questions. This was followed by a detailed study consisting face to face unstructured interviews and focused group discussion among 4-6 informants.

In IAF, soldiers are broadly divided into two categories: commissioned officers and non-commissioned officers or PBORs. PBORs include seven ranks: Aircraftman, Leading Aircraftsman, Corporal, Sergeant, Junior Warrant Officer, Warrant Officer, and Master Warrant Officer. The first three ranks are known as non-commissioned officers while the next four are called the senior non-commissioned officer. It also includes two additional honoraries commissioned ranks: Honorary Flying Officer and Honorary Flight Lieutenant given to the air warriors for their outstanding services. For this study, PBORs with five years and above of service was selected. This criterion automatically excluded soldiers of Aircraftman rank as every Aircraftsman is promoted to the rank of Leading Aircraftsman on completion of two years' service. A stratified purposive sampling method, based on rank and length of service rendered to the IAF, was used for the selection of informants. In total, 130 air warriors with more than five years of service in the IAF were interviewed for the study. Out of the 130 interviews, finally, 100 interviews were found complete in all respects and selected as a sample for this study. For the selection of sample size confidence level of 90% with a value of $Z = 1.645$ has been taken based on Yamane's (1967) table. This sample size is considered satisfactory for qualitative studies in the social sciences.

The informants were initially contacted at the places where they can easily be accessed and had some spare time for the interaction with the researcher, such as Canteen Store Department, military hospitals. They were briefed about the study and assured that their views will be utilized only for academic purposes, and their identity would be kept confidential. Initially, some informants were hesitating and even some of them refused to be interviewed while some others were giving normative answers to the questions. Later on, repetitive assurance made them somewhat comfortable and they were ready to be interviewed. These unstructured interviews and

focused group discussions, due to their flexibility, served as an important means to understand informants' subjective understanding of the dynamics of personal networks between peer groups in the military establishment and kinship networks at their native place in the background of the ICT revolution.

3. Demographic Profile of the Informants

Characteristics	Category	Number of Respondents (Percentage of the Sample)
Rank	Honorary Flight Lieutenant	3 (3)
	Honorary Flying Officer	5 (5)
	Master Warrant Officer	10 (10)
	Warrant Officer	16 (16)
	Junior Warrant Officer	26 (26)
	Sergeant	32 (32)
	Corporal	7 (7)
	Leading Aircraftsman	1(1)
Length of Service	Less than 5 years	0 (0)
	5 – 10 years	3 (3)
	10 – 15 years	6 (6)
	15 – 20 years	11 (11)
	20 – 25 years	14 (14)
	25 and above	66 (66)
Area of Residence	Rural	38 (33)
	Town	33 (33)
	Urban	29 (29)
Age	Less than 25 years	0 (0)
	25 – 30 years	5 (5)
	30 – 35 years	17 (17)
	35 – 40 years	29 (29)
	40 and above	49 (49)
Marital Status	Married	92 (92)
	Unmarried	2 (8)
	Divorced/Widower	6 (6)

4. Formation of Peer Group Networks in the Military

As an institution, the military heavily relies on the primary group networks among its members who must be willing for voluntary subordination of the self to the well-being of their team or society at large. It also exerts pressure on soldiers to break ties with other institutions and/or individuals who might make conflicting demands (Coser 1974). Military training is oriented towards the acquisition and development of these physical and mental attributes (Woodward 2000). Individual differences and idiosyncrasy among soldiers are ironed out during their training. They are kept isolated from mainstream society including their family, friends, and relatives. The living arrangements are such that no two individuals of the same ethnic and linguistic identity stay in the same room. McNeill (1997) recognized that military drill inculcates personal networks among the soldiers as it provides

many opportunities to the soldiers to settle down differences among them because all have to perform similar movements or actions on the command of a single person that is parade commander or drill instructor. Moreover, these drills also generate a sense of collective identity among the soldiers. As time passes, these practices become a habit and are reflected in their routine life. The soldiers also realize that their work is team-based efforts and they learn how to work in a team. This common identity among the soldiers can also be seen in their routine life when they wear the same uniform, works in coordination with the others. Moreover, military culture never gives preference to an individual's caste, class religion, and region. This environment broadens individuals' thinking in accommodating diversities. For them, religion and caste do not matter (Parmar 1994) and they start recognizing themselves as a class rather which, in turn, motivates them to a mix-up with others. These two factors, when combined, strong peer group social networks among the soldiers of different cultural, social, ethnic, and religious backgrounds.

5. Social Networks among Soldiers: Indian Perspective

Socio-cultural settings are vital in shaping boundaries of social networks in a given society or institution and the military is no exception to this rule. Since the military is a 'total institution' (Goffman: 1961), its members are not only marginalized from their mainstream society but also had limited contacts with their family, friends, and relatives. Military's institutional structure further limits their choice of creation of social networks within PBOR category, what Collins (2004) called class structured social relationship. Moreover, their professional, leisure and social activities are completely intermingled (Janowitz 1960). This further increase importance of social networks among soldiers (Homans 1946). The findings of the present study confirm this as 95 percent of informants were agreed with this fact. Informants argued that since they stay away from the mainstream society (25 percent) and need society to survive (27 percent). Now, the military has become their world (19 percent) where they can share daily experiences with their peers which reduces their stress (15 percent). Their social networks with peers are also significant for improving their professional knowledge and expertise. 9 percent of informants also stressed that new technology emphasizes teamwork. Coordinated networks among the team members not only ensure timely completion of the task but members enjoy their work also. A small section of the informants (5 percent), however, presented contradictory views and argued that peer group social networks have little importance in their military life as the military is a formal organization and work in a bureaucratic structure. Hence, they are bound to perform without considering their social networks with others, what UziBen-Shalom et al. (2005) called, task cohesion.

It is well-established fact (Homans, 1946, Stouffer, et al. 1949, 1949a; Huntington 1957, Janowitz 1960, Parmar 1994, Murray 1999, Rosen et al. 2003, King 2006, Burk 2008, Kumar 2017) that peer group social networks among the soldiers are useful in more than one way. Soldiers' coordinational social networks not only improve their professional expertise but also provide social and emotional support because social networks are circumscribed by the place where people live (Simmel 1955). Now, of late, the ICT revolution has challenged the separation of time and space (Giddens 1990) and social relationships became networked. Castells (1996) called this society 'network society'. Now, it becomes significant to understand how soldiers manage their social networks between peer groups and kinship relations. Findings that emerged from this study support Giddens' (1990) view on separation of time and space as all the informants unanimously accept that they are connected with their relatives residing at their native place irrespective of their place of posting in the country. Approximately half (48 percent) of the informants recognized a positive effect of the ICT on long-distance social networks. While 45 percent of informants could see both positive as well as negative consequences. A small

number of informants (6 percent), however, expressed a positive interface between the two but put greater emphasis on the cautious use of ICT. And a single informant expressed a negative interface between the two (please refer table 1 and table 2).

Table 1. Importance of social networks among soldiers

Category	Reason	No of respondents (percentage of the sample)
Social networks are important	Society is essential for survival	27 (27)
	Isolation from mainstream society	25 (25)
	The military is their world	19 (19)
	To reduce their stress	15 (15)
	Technology needs team efforts	9 (9)
Social networks are unimportant	Institutional settings	5 (5)
Total		100 (100)

Table 2. Effects of ICT on long-distance social networks

Effect	No of respondents (percentage of the sample)
Positive effect	48 (48)
Negative effects	1 (1)
Both positive and negative	45 (45)
Positive effects but need caution during use	6 (6)
Total	100 (100)

The critical concern at this stage is with developing an understanding of the ways and means by which soldiers manage their peer group networks within the military establishment and long-distance social networks with their family and kinship group in the backdrop of new ICT. This study revealed that ICT had a great influence on the everyday life of the members of the closed community such as the military. As mentioned earlier, soldiers spent most of their time in a 'total institution' with bare minimum contacts with mainstream society including the people who stay at their native place. ICT has transformed the contours of social networks as it has provided a platform for soldiers to communicate with people around the globe irrespective of time and space. Unanimously all of the informants in the present study opined that ICT had improved their long-distance networks. After the ICT revolution, they became better connected, had frequent contact, and even can video chat with them. Moreover, the majority of the informants (63 percent) further revealed that in this whole process of contacts through the phones and social media, their relationships became more dependent upon technology rather than physical contacts. This new social structure is increasingly organized around the networks and Castells (1996) called it 'network society'.

Ever increased social networks with the family and friends at the native place are not without changes in their peer group social networks within the military establishment. As mentioned earlier, organizational necessities promote face-to-face primary relationships in the military. ICT revolution, however, made soldiers busy with their electronic gadgets, such as mobile phones, laptops. They spend a large portion of their leisure activities on social networking sites, such as WhatsApp, Orkut, Twitter, etc. Nearly half (44 percent) of the informants expressed that now, their pattern of leisure activities is network-based rather than group-oriented, such as, sitting

and chitchatting with each other, playing outdoor games, frequent meetings with others within the military establishment. Sociologists (Homans, 1946, Janowitz 1959, Rosen et al. 2003, King 2006) mentioned that group-based informal activities are critical in the generation and maintenance of cohesion among soldiers. But ever-increasing reliance on the ICT made informants more self-centered and individuality has sharply increased. Informants' primary social networks with peers within the camp have weakened at the cost of increased long-distance social networks, confirmed nearly one-fourth (27 percent) informants. However, for 31 percent of informants, face-to-face contacts within the military establishment as well as a long-distance have also weakened considerably. They are less concerned about their buddies living in a similar room and/or around them. These informants became more dependent upon social media and other means of communication for the relationships. 71 percent of informants expressed that their primary face-to-face networks within the military establishment have weakened substantially in the sense that inter-personnel relations and cohesion were situation-based rather than professional. Now, they are developing a new form of 'cooperation and collaboration that does not centre on cohesion as it has been previously conceptualized by military leaders and social scientists' (UziBen-Shalom et al. 2005). It is moving from primary face-to-face networks towards informal inter-personal relations, which UziBen-Shalom et al. (2005) called task cohesion

6. Limitations of the Study

This study, perhaps, is one of the earlier studies on the interface between social networks and ICT among rank-and-file soldiers of IAF. This study, however, has some limitations. Findings of this research may not apply to commissioned officers ranks of the three-armed forces as well as to the PBORs of other sister services (the army and the navy) in India because the sample was drawn from the air force only. Despite these limitations, the present study is the author's sincere effort to address the social networks in the military..

7. Conclusion

Thus, the present empirical study revealed that social networks had significant importance in a 'total institution' like the military in more than one way. It not only has a positive influence on their professional performance but also provides a substitution for family and kinship relationships. This research further revealed that the emergence of ICT, however, has challenged the separation of time and space and replaced the process of 'dis-embedding' from the local place into the 're-embedding' at the global level and soldiers' social ties became networked. Now ICT enabled them to maintain their long-distance networks at the cost of their primary social networks within the military establishment. Now, individualism is replacing group ties in the military. This entire process is paving way for a new kind of military cohesion called 'task cohesion'.

It is well-established fact that personal networks are essential for professional soldiers. Hence, policymakers and military leadership at all levels should address this issue. This can be achieved through engaging them in collective activities through organized sports, games, etc. Moreover, they should also be briefed on the needs of peer group social networks in the military profession which, in turn, create a broader understanding of their social networks on a 'total institution'. The higher leadership should also consider reframing policies on the use of social media sites to ensure justified uses of ICT devices and monitor their implication at every level. They should also consider interacting with air warriors on regular basis to explain various ill effects of the excessive use of social media platforms. However, further research can study the soldiers' adjustment with their peers in 'task cohesion' and their effects on the military effectiveness.

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