Theirs Not to Reason Why: Understanding the Motivations of Marine Corps Officer Candidates

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ABSTRACT

This study asks Marine Corps Officer Candidates from Chicago Illinois what their motivations were from becoming a Marine Corps Officer. Historically, motivations for military service have been associated with Honor, service to one’s country, and a deep sense of calling. However, many modern studies suggest that motivations for volunteering for military service emulate rational-choice ethos, reflected in the values of a market-place system. Using qualitative survey data and participant observation, the underlying motivations for wanting to be Officers in the Marine Corps from this sample were explored as well as what these cases tell us about human motivation in general. This study found that the motivational impetus for desiring a Commission as a Marine reflected the historical ethos of the military, and mirror the institutional values of the Marine Corps of Honor, Courage, and Commitment.
INTRODUCTION

Through experience with the military and through the lens of the, then, new field of military psychology, Charles C. Moskos Jr. saw the military as offering two different types of motivations for joining: institutional and occupational motivations (1977). He related these, respectively, to intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Moskos saw that the military has been historically associated with longstanding and strong institutional characteristics. As citizens, he argued, we idealize a military made up of internally motivated individuals who put the betterment of the group before themselves. But Moskos also saw these characteristics beginning to shift, especially from institutional/internal to occupational/external, which raises concern for our militaries regarding the ideal type of military service member as well as the effectiveness of our militaries.

From the time of Moskos’s work to the present, there has been much research focused on gauging and categorizing our military men and women’s motivations for joining in order to understand more deeply the ethos and future of our militaries. But the decades of research have left a void in our knowledge of motivations for military service. Few studies have looked at anything but specific samples of Army enlisted, active duty personnel; a group who differs greatly from other military demographics both quantitatively and qualitatively. As our national government is forced to compete with private companies for our nation’s best and brightest, branches of the military are faced with a challenge of finding highly motivated, highly skilled, intelligent, and mentally and physically adaptable individuals to fit their own needs. This challenge has been exacerbated in the search for young officer candidates, who make up a small minority of all branches, yet hold tremendous influence on the future ethos of our militaries due to their leadership position (McGarr 1960). In fact, it is the motivations of this small
demographic that are instrumental in Moskos’s original concern regarding motivations in the military.

The concern that motivations for military service are beginning to shift towards an occupational model is nowhere greater than in the United States Marine Corps where there are fewer officers per enlisted person (1:8) than any other branch as well as the fewest overall officers (apx. 25,000) (DOD 2010 and HQMC 2012). One study looking at officers of all branches suggests that officers rate higher on institutional and internal sources of motivation than enlisted personnel (Jans 2008). However, these findings, by and large, have not been repeated in enough samples to be generalizable. This raises the question, if officers are so instrumental in maintaining the foundational ethos of our military, what type of officers are our militaries getting? In order to answer this question, it is important to understand the original motivational impetus for an officer wanting to join the military, and in this case, The Marine Corps. Up to this point, little to no research has been done on Marine Corps officer candidates who have not yet become active duty. Yet it is exactly this group who will become the exemplars of the Marine ethos, and as such have a direct impact on the future character of the Corps. By utilizing 39 qualitative surveys and participant observation I examined the question: What is it that is motivating Marine Corps officer candidates primarily? This study revealed that Candidates’ explanations of their motives for wanting to join The Corps reflected the institutional values of the Marine Corps of honor, courage, and commitment.

Existing scholarship points us towards two competing hypotheses. First, Marines are more likely to be motivated by institutional and intrinsic motives due to the nature of the branch. Second, motivations are trending towards occupational and externally motivated individuals in both the military and in the private sector, so military motivations will reflect this shift (Sturkey
If the latter is true it would have a devastating effect on the ethos and effectiveness of the branch, as Charles Moskos points out. However, even today we idealize our militaries as being comprised of highly motivated individuals willing to make grave sacrifices on behalf of others. In today’s society, military men and women are seen as heroes. Marines are accepted as the most motivated of the branches, due to the history and performance record they hold. The Marine Corps continue to hold the highest standards on personnel requirements in physical, mental, and moral categories than any other line of service. Along these lines, the requirements for becoming a Marine Officer are higher than requirements for becoming an officer in any other branches. In this way, given the nature of the Marines as a branch we would expect Marine Corps Officer Candidates, who are still in the midst of becoming officers, to have the strongest internal motivations. However, given the gravity of the situation that Moskos hypothesized in the 1970s regarding the shift of military motivations, we cannot afford to overlook questions such as this. Furthermore, these types of questions ought to be explored on account of their broader philosophical and existential relevance for illuminating human nature and human motivations for pro-social action in a survivalist world. Such an approach allows us not only the pragmatic knowledge that comes from sound theory, but also the moral knowledge gained from better understanding of human motivations for pro-social actions.

This study attempts, therefore to grapple with two questions at one time, both the research question stated above, as well as a more existential and ethical question at which I believe more research should be aimed. This latter question is ‘what is human nature’, and what is it that motivates our species to take specific types of actions? I pursue this question through the use of two conflicting philosophical paradigms, the Platonic or neo-Platonic view, and the Modern Analytical view. I then present the reader with an overview of available literature on
human motivations, specifically motivations for joining and serving in the military. After outlining the methods employed in this study, I then present and interpret the findings, both quantitative and qualitative in order to explain what types of patterns and individuals emerged as well as what their underlying motivations are. Finally, I connect the social scientific findings to the broader philosophical questions before concluding with a discussion of the methods and findings as well as aims for future research on the topic.

**PHILOSOPHICAL IMPETUS**

The history of humanity has been marked by a distinct enthrallment with introspection. Tracing through centuries of the accumulated knowledge of our species, one can attest that we are a species predominantly fascinated by and with ourselves. Of such introspective questions asked through the ages, the question of what motivates human actions has been one of the most prevalent and, I believe the most important to the future direction, identity, and well-being of our species. Philosophers and religious thinkers have made great strides towards understanding what motivations lie at our core and make us tick. In addition psychologists, sociologists, and other social scientists have shed light on the issues from different angles as well. Over the past decades, the dominating paradigm has been a rational choice theory that ideologically reflects the values of a market based ethical system (Heine 2011). Human beings seek satisfaction of their needs in a rational way, weighing costs and benefits with a Game Theory twist of anticipation and manipulation. The various historical and contemporary accounts have had a tremendous impact on how we view ourselves and the people around us.
However, there has been a proverbial thorn in the side of scholars and laypersons alike. We all acknowledge that the picture begins to fall apart when we consider pro-social actions, actions which defy rational choice, such as volunteering for military service (Riemer 1998; McAdam 1988). On the philosophical side of the debate, perhaps no one man has had such an impact on our discussion of human nature as the philosopher Thomas Hobbes. His modern analytical approach to describing the manners in which human beings comprise society came as a sharp critique of classical philosophers like Plato and Aristotle which dominated human thought for centuries. Much of Hobbes’s work, and work of other similar thinkers such as Machiavelli, has revolutionized western thought over the centuries; a revolution which has painted a rather grim and skeptical picture of human nature.

In his seminal work *The Leviathan*, Thomas Hobbes posits that basic human desires and fears drive all our actions. Of these fears and desires, the most powerful desire is the desire for ease and the most powerful fear is the fear of violent death at the hands of others (Hobbes 1964). For any individual, the only needs which nature provides are the “love of ease” and “fear of death” (Hobbes 1962, pp. 93-94). While it can be debated whether Hobbes was speaking of what is currently viewed as Rational Choice Theory or something else, it is clear that he saw social behaviors as rational way to satisfy these needs. Such a claim is supported in his ideas of what constituted the “social contract”. Hobbes alleged that humans in a state of nature (a pre-political world) would necessarily bring about a war of all against all. He writes, “…without a common power to keep them all [men/people] in awe, they are in that condition which is called war…every many, against every man” (Hobbes 1962, pp. 100). This belief is summed up in his infamous quote: life in the state of nature is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short” (Hobbes 1962). In this way, it is rational for man to give up certain rights in order to bring about peace.
and stability, protecting oneself from the threat of death at the hands of others (Burchell 1999).
According to Hobbes, this brought about the existence of the commonwealth, or society as we know it. But within this commonwealth where human actions are guided by rational choice (fears and desires) pro-social behavior would still be far from the minds of the citizens. Self-interests predominate in Hobbes’s account, both before and after the establishment of a commonwealth. Once peace is secured and a commonwealth established, it makes no sense for one to volunteer for activities that would come at a cost, or risk, to the individual, especially to pursue activities that bring distinct possibilities of decreasing “ease” and increasing the chances for “premature violent death” which are inherent in military service (Burchell 1999; Hobbes 1962). While the individual acknowledges that this type of behavior might be necessary for the security of the peace the commonwealth provides, Hobbes does not explain why any individual would wish to pursue such action. If human motivation truly aligns with this Hobbesian type of view, it is impossible to understand how any nation can craft a military, and why any individual would desire to be a part of it.

In this way, Hobbes’s account of human nature and what motivates and guides our actions, while no less valid for explaining many aspects of our lives, does not encompass the full range of possibilities existing in the human condition. It cannot fully describe what has been the most frustrating and revered types of behaviors human beings take part in-- actions that come at a cost to the individual but benefit the greater good, i.e. altruism. In fact, many of the volunteers for military service today volunteer with hopes of seeing combat, and acknowledge the sacrifices they will have to make. Such attitudes do not provide any materialistic benefit that would make sense in light of a Hobbesian account of motivation. Serving the commonwealth is seen, for
Hobbes, as something everyone would understand the necessity, but for which something that nobody would volunteer (Burchell 1999).

In fact, Hobbes did not believe that there was a greater good (*summum bonum*) to be served, “as is spoken of in the books of the old moral philosophers” (Hobbes 1962, pp. 80). He did not believe in a transcendent good toward which human nature is oriented. For Hobbes, human action is driven towards these types of altruistic ends through purposeful socialization by the commonwealth which, in essence, tricks citizens into believing that such a *summum bonum* exists. This socialization is a rational action taken by the commonwealth in order to draw citizens away from their “passive” citizenry and towards “active” citizenry so the commonwealth may be perpetuated (Burchell 1999, pp. 506; Oldfield 1990). Therefore, Hobbes traces altruism, and any other type of pro-social action, back to deceptively instilled beliefs in the values of the commonwealth, similar to the socialization that takes part in Plat’s Utopia through the “Noble Lie” which provides the basis and justification for the different castes of citizens (Republic, III). These values, Hobbes would say, in reality are contrary to our human nature which contains only fears and desires, but because of the socialization, the public narrative told by the commonwealth, people buy in and believe it allowing the society to perpetuate peace and the status quo. In our natural state, without a commonwealth, a “Leviathan”, which threatens citizens with greater fears and instills false beliefs regarding the greater good, humans would never take part in such pro-social actions. Even when we do, according to Hobbes, it cannot be said that these actions reflect anything natural in regards to humans. Pro-social behavior, for Hobbes, is part of a grandiose system of control, a public narrative, designed to perpetuate the peace brought about by the rule of the Leviathan.
But can pro-social propensities really be explained in this way? Would any of us accept a world like that? I don’t believe we would; there seems to be something innately wrong with this type of explanation. This can simply be seen in the ways we honor and perceive our military members as heroes. Through a Hobbesian light, one cannot make sense of military ethos of honor, courage, and commitment to something greater than oneself and having any natural basis. Within a Hobbesian framework, it is impossible to understand why some people see service as a calling, something they are internally drawn to, something natural for them.

In fact, if Hobbes’s account is correct, this raises great concern for the status of our militaries, for we all acknowledge the importance of having service members motivated by and through the values of protecting the common good, willing to put the goals of the group in front of their own desires and fears. Social and psychological research indicates that many of our service members are in fact motivated by a sense of calling and institutional values (Eighmey 2006; Taubman-Ben-Ari et al. 2006; Woodruff et al. 2006; Sturkey 2002; McGarr 1960). Since we see this in reality, the picture Hobbes paints of human motivation seems to fall short of explaining what it is that calls people to serve and protect the common good (summum bonum) or take part in altruistic behavior that comes at a cost or risk to the individual.

Although Hobbes’s modern philosophy faces obvious shortcomings when considering motivation for military service, a Classical lens does indeed provide the philosophical justifications for individual propensities to serve a greater good, making more sense of this aspect of human motivation. Hobbes would say that it is not in our human nature to serve a greater good, because at our core we are motivated only by the love of ease and fear death. These motives lead to the creation of the commonwealth and Leviathan, but cannot be said to explain clearly any of our other propensities to be internally motivated toward pro-social
behavior—especially in a military context that brings with it such vast personal sacrifices, discomfort, and the possibility of death. Looking back to the Classical thinkers Plato, and subsequently Aristotle, it is possible to understand and correlate our current understandings of what motivates individuals to take actions that otherwise defy a Hobbesian type of rational choice explanation.

Contrary to Hobbes, thinkers such as Aristotle and Plato saw man as innately social, and saw the needs of the group as superior to the needs of the individual. Aristotle’s famous saying in his work Politics, “man is a social creature”, evidences such a point. In his dialogue, The Republic, Plato discusses at length that the well-being of the city (commonwealth, society, etc...) is measured through the proper organization of each individual serving the function that he or she is best suited for by nature. If we view military service as one of these functions, the picture becomes more lucid. It is the types of thinking supported by these two philosophers which enables us to understand why an individual would hold internal motivations to serve the state. Where Hobbesian analytical philosophies fall short in this regard, Aristotelian, Platonic, and Neo-platonic lines of thinking indeed help us make sense of that which motivates individuals to do things that promote the needs of the group over the individual, as well as offer an encompassing world view in which such things all fit (Burchell 1999).

Aristotle and Plato both saw the ideal (and happy) person as the person who is properly fulfilling the role given to them by nature. Plato went further to say in the Republic that it is the person whose soul’s three parts are organized, balanced, and in harmony, with the proper part governing, and the proper parts being governed, who is the happiest. Plato extends this tri-part metaphor to what made a city, or a state, good and well. It was when wisdom and right reason were governing that justice and happiness would be truly possible. Plato suggested that there
were different types of natures that existed within human beings, and that some were better fitted
to certain functions than others. He uses the example of “Guardians” in his utopia to exemplify a
type of person whom by nature is suited for the protection and service of the common good i.e.
military service. While these persons were better suited by their nature to protect and serve,
others were better suited by nature to fulfill alternate functions according to the nature of their
soul. These types of natures were not to be seen as negative aspects or undesirable. Rather, they
represented people fulfilling the purposes proper to them by their nature. That is, because the
ordering of their soul inclines them towards certain purposes in an Aristotelian sense. These
natural differences are what made the city function properly and what created a happy and good
person according to Plato, a person fulfilling the role nature intended for them towards the
greater good. According to Plato’s worldview then, people are internally drawn towards the role
for which they are naturally fitted.

Plato claims that it is a specific type of person with a specific ordering of their soul that
makes them feel inclined to serve a higher, political purpose. In this way, that purpose to them
will feel obligatory and they will not need any external factor to push them towards it. People
who are willing to sacrifice for the betterment of the group are the types of people that can be
included in the training of the Guardians. These types of people are by nature better suited to
serve the public good, which is the most important and revered end to pursue according to such
philosophies. They must be, “philosophic, spirited, swift, and strong”, for starters (Republic, IV
376 c). With the proper experiences and training these guardians protect the city because they
willingly put the good and happiness of the city above their individual well-being. In a way,
they are the exemplars of altruism and the most honored citizens, and parallels can be drawn
between the guardians and military men and women today. Both are willing to make great
sacrifices and to subject themselves to meager and uncomfortable conditions because they believe they are performing their proper function in accordance with the natural organization of their soul. They are doing something that seems to come natural for them, not forced upon them by some lie or narrative.

In this light, motivations for pro-social behavior, such as military service, make sense. Plato said that this whole system required the careful selection of the right kind of individual. He writes, “Then we must choose from among our guardians the sort of men who seem…most inclined…to do what they believe to be advantageous for the city…” (Republic 412d). This is what still happens today. In the case of Marine Officer Candidates, no branch has such extensive and rigorous screening methods to select the best and most suited individuals to be future leaders of Marines. In this case those most suitable for military service, specifically ones who will be leaders in the military, are those that, “…[believe] that they must do what is best for the city…and most unwilling to do the opposite” (Republic 412d). Because individual happiness according to this philosophy is only found in the happiness of the whole (line 417e), there will be individuals who are motivated in this altruistic fashion; those whose nature it is to pursue the betterment of the whole. These will be the ones who are truly suited to that function and will make it through rigorous training.

These types of individuals, or “Guardians”, will not shy away from the personal sacrifices they will have to make because their soul is guiding their action in this specific way and their happiness is constituted by fulfilling their nature (Republic IV). To them this pursuit is internally satisfying, and it is grounded in the values of the institution they volunteer to protect with their own lives. In this way their service is like a calling which they must heed if they are to do what is in their soul according to their nature. The reasons the Guardians are honored is not
because of a deliberately placed lie or public narrative which provides the validity for the values of the social structure, but because other people truly acknowledge these persons as being of a special nature, and fulfilling an essential function and role that many are not able or willing to fill due to their own nature. When interpreted in this light, we begin to see the parallels between Plato’s Guardians and military men and women today. By going back to classical thinkers like Aristotle and Plato that we can solve many of the puzzles realized by rational, self-interest accounts of motivation made popular by thinkers like Thomas Hobbes. After all, it is the philosophies of classical thinkers that justify and account for why people volunteer for military service today.

**SOCIAL SCIENTIFIC LITURATURE REVIEW**

*Volunteering, the Emergence of Polarized Motives*

From philosophy to sociology to modern brain science, human beings are and have been perpetually fascinated by what motives our actions and what this says about our innate nature. Seeking to understand what human nature truly is, many disciplines have asked the question of what motivates our behaviors in order to understand the push and pulls of human nature. Ancient philosophers proposed generally that the type of actions individuals take reflect our very nature-- what makes us “human” and what human nature actually is. Modern philosophers have often argued that the answers to the larger questions regarding our humanity and our existence lie in our rational functions. If only, thinkers in this view argued, we could break the quantum code embedded in our rational analysis of possible outcomes then the algorithmic principles that are thought to run life would be revealed (thinkers in the Broadly Hobbesian translation). But
we have already seen how this type of philosophy does not wholly explain all actions in the human spectrum of behaviors. In addition, advances in social sciences have revealed new perspectives on this perennial question.

From a sociological standpoint, we have forged ahead in understanding human behavior by studying people’s motivations for volunteering. Volunteering is a pro-social activity defined as “long term helping” or more explicitly, “an ongoing, planned, and discretionary pro-social behavior that benefits non-intimate others and offers little or no tangible reward” (Finkelstien 2008). Volunteering is the exemplary case of pro-social behavior. People volunteer in order to fulfill a particular need. Functional analysis of motivation tells us people will continue volunteering to the degree that their experiences satisfy relevant motives (Clary et al. 1998). Another predominant theoretical observation for explaining what motivates people to volunteer comes from Role Identity Theory (Piliavin, Grube, & Callero 2002). From this angle the self is viewed as consisting of multiple identities that are generated through ongoing social interaction. Over time, one comes to internalize particular roles and incorporates them into their own image of self. Along these lines, the individual’s particular experiences and other peoples’ expectations become integrated to create a sense of self for that individual. These socialized influences begin to dissipate later in life as the individual’s actions and behaviors become guided by attempts to remain consistent with his or her image of self (Finkelstien 2008). Volunteering then literally becomes a, “resource for action in public service”, as well as a way to satisfying one’s sense of self (Piliavin, Grube, & Callero 2002).

Another interesting consequence which stems from Role Identity Theory tells us that, categorically, certain types of people are more likely to volunteer than others, especially for internal reasons. People possessing pro-social personality traits often feel the need to help others,
feel responsible for the fate of others, and have a greater propensity to feel empathy (Finkelstien 2008). Interestingly enough, these types of traits are also positively correlated with higher measures of self-confidence and assertiveness. Finally, and not surprisingly, sociologists have noticed that these types of people partake in more pro-social behaviors. In summary, people will partake of actions to the degree that they obtain some type of reward. But the type of person one is, their experiences, and worldview cause them to perceive certain things as more rewarding than others. Sociology and other humanitarian disciplines have separated out two different types of motivation, intrinsic and extrinsic, as “dispositional factors that contribute to volunteering” (Finkelstien 2008).

Intrinsic motivations, or internal motives, are those which are satisfied from within and through the activity itself, whereas extrinsic, or external motives, are those which require an outside source of satisfaction such as adding to a resume, gaining an inside track to career, or fulfilling community service hours. Intrinsic motivation “refers to actions undertaken because they are inherently interesting or in some way satisfying. The individual participates in an activity for its inherent interest or enjoyment. Because the objective resides in the behavior itself…” (Finkelstien 2008). Intrinsic motivations are correlated with increased volunteer self-concept, pro-social tendencies, increased time spent volunteering, and stronger motivational strength on the whole, and increased performance. It follows that, “extrinsically motivated behaviors are performed in order to obtain some separable outcome…some *instrumental* value” and will have poorer performance (Finkelstien 2008; Ryan & Deci 2008 [emphasis added]).

*Types of Military Motivations: “I want you!” or do I?*
Charles C. Moskos Jr. was the first contemporary American social scientist to see military service as offering two different types of motivations. Through his own experiences he saw the military offering “institutional and occupational” motives (1977). He related these, respectively, to intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Noting that the military has been historically associated with longstanding and strong institutional characteristics, he hypothesized these characteristics were beginning to shift dangerously from institutional to occupational. This raised great concern. Moskos knew that this negative trend would inevitably bring drops in troop readiness, morale, and combat effectiveness-- essential elements of an effective military that are all heavily influenced by levels and sources of motivation.

Moskos defined institutional motives as those transcending individual needs and self-interests en lieu of a “presumed higher good” (Moskos, 1977a). Individuals place the institution above themselves, and are willing to sacrifice a great deal in order to maintain it. The institution model of motivation can be captured within the words, “duty”, “honor”, and “country”. People holding institutional views are likely to see what they are doing as a “calling”, not a mere job, and is “legitimated in terms of institutional values” (Moskos, 1977a; 1977b). The benefits an institutionally motivated individual anticipates receiving stem from the sense of calling one feels to serve, the confidence that the institution will take care of the basic needs of the individual member in a paternalistic manner, and certain mental or emotional benefits such as the feeling that one is participating in something that is meaningful, worthwhile, and making a positive difference in the world. Ultimately, institutional motives parallel intrinsic motives.

On the other side of the coin, occupational motives are associated with external motivations, and are “legitimated in terms of the market place” (Moskos, 1977a; 1977b). What satisfies the needs in an occupationally motivated individual are mainly material, but always
external ends. They are similar to what motivates action in a market economy. In this way individuals motivated by occupational ends are likely to observe military service as a means to an end, instead of as an end in itself as an individual holding institutional motives would. The prevailing motives for this type of member would be monetary, and observed as equivalent to the amount of work put in. By these methods a person sees their relationship with the institution as a contractual obligation. Occupational motives, like external motives, are associated with lower levels of general motivation for difficult tasks, lack of felt cohesion within the group, and lower performances at the individual and the group level as well as failure to adapt to adverse conditions, and a higher propensity for quitting when things get tough or the costs outweigh the perceived benefit. Motivated in this way we know that, “Materially motivated soldiers are less likely to remain in reserve military service if deployed overseas…and less likely to report to serve the country” (Griffith, 2008). In this way, occupational motives degrade and threaten the welling being of the institution. It is easy to see how these types of motivation have no place in the constitution of our militaries.

The theoretical constructs of volunteering can be applied to motivations for serving in the military. “The military”, as the late prominent military psychologist Charles C. Moskos, Jr. put it, “can be understood as social organizations which maintain levels of autonomy while refracting broader societal trends” (1977a). Intrinsic motivations are more desirable when looking at potential recruitment for volunteering due to the fact they are highly correlated with increases in volunteer self-concept, pro-social tendencies, time spent volunteering, and stronger motivational strength on the whole. People who are intrinsically motivated often outperform those who are extrinsically motivated. They do not give up when their perceived benefit evaporates because the benefit is internal. In the military, where performance can dictate the fate
of the nation, intrinsically motivated people ought to be sought out and intrinsic motivations ought to be fostered as much as possible.

Following this line, it seems obvious that the military, more than any other organization, ought to be comprised of intrinsically motivated members due to the nature of its mission. Moskos says again:

Military service has traditionally had many features close to the calling model. One thinks of the extended tours abroad; the fixed term of the enlistment; liability for 24-hour service availability; frequent movement of self and family; subjection to military discipline and law; and inability to resign, strike, or negotiate over working conditions. All this is above and beyond the dangers inherent in military maneuvers and actual combat operations.

What Moskos is saying is that in order for a person to successfully and effectively respond to these types of conditions present in military service they must be motivated by internal, institutional factors. If not, the slow decay of time under such conditions will inevitably render them washed up, frustrated, and ultimately unfit for duty. As any military leader knows, losing men and women in this way can destroy an entire unit.

Therefore, the type of motivations (institutional/internal or occupational/external) service men and women hold cause serious shifts in the performance, readiness, structure, and morale of the armed forces. Moskos’s fears were realized in 1970 when a shift away from the traditional institutional values and towards modern capitalistic occupational values was noted in a report of the President’s Commission. These findings disturbed many, and caught the eyes of scholars, military leaders, and politicians alike. The findings generated a great deal of attention by threatening and undermining the process by which our own means of national defense and power projection is sustained. From this time on there has been general concern aimed at stopping this
shift, and reversing it while still providing the historic paternalistic relationship required for members to lead stable lives of their own.

However, it is not possible in today’s world for any organization to only possess individuals purely motivated by institutionally values. Some minimal level of subsistence must be maintained. The military is no different. While values such as honor, country, and duty are (and must be) emphasized, members need to be provided with enough compensations to allow them to sustain stable lives for both themselves and dependents-- compensations such as salaries, housing, medical care, and retirement benefits. Lately though, this balance has shifted as compensations have begun to cater to individuals motivated by material or advancement gains rather than the historic values which have made the institution successful in the first place.

Despite being aware of the dangers of recruiting externally motivated members, modern recruitment strategies have begun to erode traditional institutional ethos. It is not uncommon for recruits to be offered signing bonuses and financial assistance for higher education through scholarships which give monetary compensation before any service is required. Although the Marine Corps has largely stayed away from these types of incentives, other branches, like the Army, are forced to implement them in order to meet their man power needs as they compete with corporations in the civilian sector for America’s best and brightest. At first these were thought to represent attempts by the institution to fulfill its paternalistic obligation to the individual member in order to foster institutional motives. But recently these perks are beginning to be seen as the ends of joining the military, service being just a means.

The men and women who comprise our military ought to possess certain traits, and personality types that lead them to be internally motivated to pursue serving. They ought to be
of a certain moral and ethical fiber so that they will effectively accomplish their mission and perpetuate the institution as a whole (McGarr 1960). We want them to be the Guardians, and our officers to be the Philosophers, that Plato discussed. As a society, from a theoretical standpoint, we recognize this as well. For these reasons much effort through education and training goes into fostering the type of character that makes an individual a good, a good soldier, and an upstanding person volunteer (See above discussion of Finkelstien and Plato’s Guardians in *The Republic*). In fact, this calling is observed in a line from a newspaper quoted by an Army Major General, “Never in the past has such emphasis upon integrity, honesty of thought, and necessity for acceptance of personal responsibilities been necessary with American troops” (McGarr 1960). Traits such as these remain essential even today in military service and training. At Officer Candidate School for the Marine Corps young candidates are indoctrinated with “The 14 Leadership Traits”. These traits are justice, judgment, discipline, integrity, dependability, tact, initiative, enthusiasm, bearing, unselfishness, courage, knowledge, loyalty, and endurance (Sturkey 2002). But more than a list of desirable attributes, these character traits represent the holistic type of person a leader is supposed to be, and it is emphasized that every member, enlisted or officer, ought to be ready to step up and lead in the time of need.

There is a certain expectation that needs to be met in order to maintain an organization of individuals who will be ready and willing to get the job done under extreme adversity and much less than favorable conditions and in order to maintain the performance record our nation’s militaries have had. These expectations are indoctrinated in the exercises and situations for which potential combat military members are trained. However, we do not forget that, “Human nature being what it is, we all realize that in any large segment of this, or any society, there always will be a few who will not measure up when the ‘chips are down’ (McGarr 1960). In the
nature of the military profession during wartime the stakes become much higher because those “stakes” become not simply bottom lines or reductions in the end of the year bonuses, but human lives and possibly the fate of a nation. These stakes then depend on the collective and individual strength of service men and women. Strength that comes from character, integrity, “honesty…and devotion to duty”, and the other virtues discussed above (McGarr 1960). Strength that comes from the motivations for being there in the first place. If the motivations of these individuals, the reason they are there, do not provide strong foundations which can carry the emotional and psychological load of these requirements, the “collective and individual strength” will be severely diminished and performance will fail.

Past research has shown that the more internally motivated individuals adhere to the institutional values, and derive motivation from them, the more they are valuable and useful to the organization. One study found, “institutionally motivated soldiers were more likely to not let their buddies and family down, and believed [more] in the mission and service to the country” (Griffith 2008). These types of individuals are necessary for the success of the military, just as much as they are necessary for the success of any other group. For these reasons it is necessary and essential to have men and women possessing internal motivations that stem from the institutional values.

Motivations Emerging from Past Research

So, what types of motivations do military service members have? Research has asked the question of what motivates soldiers, sailors, airmen, and Marines for decades. In the body of knowledge on the individual military member that came as a result of World War II and Vietnam we claim to know quite a lot about what motivates our active duty service men. As our society
as a whole moves towards occupational models of motivation Moskos laid out, it is inevitable that men and women possessing the values of the market place will seek entry in the volunteer forces that comprise our nation’s military (1977a; Woodruff et al. 2006). However, the branches whose missions are to fight and win land battles have developed both combat and supporting roles to accommodate both types of individuals. This is due to necessity and the knowledge that poor motivation and morale are more of a threat to these branches than anywhere else. While the Marine Corps holds the slogan, “Every Marine is a Rifleman”, it still contains many supporting roles (Sturkey 2002). The Army has drawn the line between combat and support elements much thicker and much darker, even to appear as being composed of “Two Armies” (Burland & Hickes Lundquist 2013). This split makes sense from an objective standpoint. The Army has about three times the man power needs as the Marine Corps. As a matter of fact, it has the largest population of any branch of the military (DOD 2010). Combine this with its strategic role of fighting and winning sustained land campaigns, it makes sense the Army would develop both large mutually exclusive combat branches and support branches.

Here research shows a significant split between the number of internal motivations cited and whether or not the respondent seeks out a support or combat role. One study has shown that there is a statistically significant difference between the motivations of support soldiers and combat soldiers, and it is the combat soldiers who tend to be the most driven by internal/institutional motives (Burland & Hickes Lundquist 2013). Because the current study is examining Marine Corps Officer Candidates who as a group believe they will end up in a combat role, previous research on motives for combat service is relevant.

Historically, the anticipated answer for what motivated combat soldiers to fight was the sense of unit cohesion they experienced as depicted in many Hollywood productions (Wont et al.
Many cited these bonds, a sense of brotherhood, associated with overcoming extreme adversity, danger, and death with the reasons combat soldiers kept fighting. But this does not answer the questions of why people volunteer for the military in the first place. And still, what has begun to emerge as the ‘average’ soldier in today’s armies is a more educated and sophisticated one where the notions of freedom, democracy, and liberty as well as other moral concepts of war are now being reported as motivational sparks (Wong et al. 2003). These morally salient messages represent the individual combatant becoming more aware of the reasons for wars and violent conflicts, and their own methods for coming to terms with them. As this happens, surely the motives these men and women possess have also changed.

*The Modern Soldier*

The modern picture of what motivates soldiers, in turn, is more complex then prior notions. What emerges from the recent literature is that our active duty personnel tend to be motivated more along the lines of the institutional concepts observed by the foundational work of Moskos (Eighmey 2006; Griffith 2008; Taubman-Ben-Ari & Findler 2006; Wong et al. 2003). Values such as “fidelity”, “service to country”, a “sense of duty”, “honor”, to “protect”, and “dignity” were all included in various reports of why active duty combat personnel were motivated to keep fighting. The picture that emerges from the decades of research is one of an enlisted soldier and one of a highly motivated individual who was willing to make the great sacrifices due to an internal moral impetus. But this picture excludes Marines and Officers, and more importantly what the initial internal moral impetus is.

Looking at the motivations for active duty combat personnel helps to shed light on what makes youths volunteer for military service in the first place. This question has been largely
ignored in past research. In order to meet manpower needs, and compete with the civilian sector for intelligent and capable men and women, our militaries need to know what gets recruits and candidates in the door in the first place and be able to weed out those whose motives make them less than desirable as members of the armed forces. Todd Woodruff and colleagues noted that the higher the propensity to serve before actual enlistment, the stronger the motivations were once enlisted (Woodruff et al. 2006). While it is necessary to understand not only what already serving, active duty personnel report as their reasons for serving, it is more important to understand the reasons that compel young men and women to seek out such a path in the first place. Woodruff found that those with high propensities before beginning service “reported significant institutional motivation to join and plans for a military career…and was not significantly related to occupational…motivations” (2006). The initial moral impetus is important.

The limited research on enlisted personnel indicates that the initial motive for joining the military is an institutional one. In one study performed by John Eighmey, “Why Do Youth Enlist?”, youths reported strong institutional motives for making the decision to enter the military (2006). In another example one study attempted to link mortality salience, or the degree to which one expected physical and mental hardships, with self-reported motivations to serve and found that the anticipation of physical and mental hardships was associated with higher levels of motivations. In Israel, where this study was done, military service is compulsory. Never the less, motivations reported for military service in the sample group remained internal/institutional. This study said, “the fact that military service is compulsory does not explain the high level of motivation”, which included “independence”, “personal responsibility”, “initiative”, and the chance to protect one’s country from constant attacks (Taubman-Ben-Ari & Findler 2006). In
summary, the limited literature on enlisted personnel tell us that what motivates youth to volunteer for military service in the first place are internal motives grounded in the values of whichever institution they join. As confident as these studies make us, we still know next to nothing about the smallest demographic of our militaries, The Marine Corps Officer.

**The Two Hypotheses: What are We Getting?**

The answers to the question of what motivates military service members in general, including Officers and Marines, come mostly from reports on enlisted personnel of the Army. There is a problem with this generalization. In fact, there is virtually no information on Marines of any rank across the board, either active duty or reserve. Again this is not surprising given the limited amount of individuals in this demographic (there are roughly 8 enlisted members for every 1 officer in the Marine Corps, and the Marines are the smallest branch of the military excluding the outlier of the Coast Guard). Marine Corps officers represent the smallest population in all of the American militaries, somewhere around 25,000 in total (DOD 2010 and HQMC 2012). Based on convenience alone, it makes logical sense that this group has been left out. For these reasons, the current study seeks not only to find, but to understand the reasons for why individuals want to join the Marine Corps as Officers.

Officers and Marines have been observed as being in a category all their own, and so we expect their motivations to be distinguishable from other ranks and branches as well (McGarr 1960; Sturkey 2002). While this study is not comparative in nature, the starting hypothesis that Marine Corps Officer Candidates are highly motivated by internal factors and institutional values arises from previous research, as incomplete as it is. Still, the argument that motivations for officers in the Marine Corps are higher and predominately intrinsic can be made based on the
longstanding reputation of the Corps. The historical prestige of the Marine Corps, its selective nature and higher standards for entry, as well as its “first to fight” mission, distinguishes the Marine Corps and its Officers amongst forces around the world (Sturkey 2002). As far as officers, it is a commonly known fact that officers are expected to set the example in all branches of service (McGarr 1960). Therefore, we would expect the Marine Corps to be comprised of the most internally and institutionally motivated individuals, Officers being the most so.

If our expectations based on history and assumptions alone are not confirmed through further research, then this study would add to the growing body of evidence which concerns many military officials, and be in support of the opposite hypothesis. That is the theory laid out by Charles C. Moskos Jr. which claims that motivations in the military are shifting from institutional to occupational; a shift which could threaten the effectiveness and structure of our nation’s militaries (1977a, 1977b). If this negative trend is found among officers in the Marine Corps, who live by the motto “Ductus Exemplo” (Leadership through example), then the problem is much more serious than the literature reveals. However, the most recent analysis supports our historical assumptions that our young officers are indeed internally motivated along the institutional lines Moskos laid out. This hypothesis is supported by the findings of Nick Jans, in which he found that Officers have become less concerned with material motivations and more concerned with institutional motives (2009). But this is not the end of the discussion.

The body of knowledge previously assembled is reassuring, but suffers from a systematic over emphasis on Army personnel, primarily recently enlisted males, as well as a great deal of response biases. So, while previous research indicates that our militaries remain to be motivated by internal factors and institutional means we cannot ignore the response and sampling biases that shapes the many studies that confirm our assumptions. The question that I believe has
already been answered is: “what type of individual is most likely to fit the needs of the Marine Corps, and ensure the continuing readiness, morale, and effectiveness of the institution?” The obvious answer is a person motivated by intrinsic factors and institutional motives, willing to make personal sacrifices for the betterment of the institution he or she is representing. But the question Charles Moskos asked some 40 years ago remains:…is this what they are getting?

METHODS

General Strategy

The methods used in this study were intended to be straight forward and parsimonious. The process of gathering information on those motivations was intended to mirror the organic nature of the question. The strategy for this study was to design a qualitative questionnaire that could be completed by respondents in a few minutes that would ask specific questions regarding reasons for wanting to join the Marine Corps as an Officer, distribute the questionnaire to all of the subject population either in person or electronically, and then synthesize the data.

The Questionnaire

Due to special access and foreknowledge gained on account of being an Officer Candidate, assembling a questionnaire that would be suitable for the study as well as be most likely to yield worthwhile answers was not difficult to construct. At Officer Candidate School, all candidates are given a survey near the end of their 12 weeks in Quantico. This survey is intended to gauge various aspects of the effectiveness of OCS, candidates’ opinions, and candidate’s particular motivations for coming to OCS in the first place. Many of the questions
used in this study were based off of the questions on such surveys. Specifically, the portion of
the questionnaire where respondents are given a list of possible reasons and then asked to rate
their top five on a scale comes from and was motivated by the surveys candidates take at OCS.
In addition, when applying to OCS as applicants, applicants are asked to give a 100 word
explanation for why they want to be a Marine Corps Officer. Again, this type of question was the
primary motivation for the open ended questions that are found on the questionnaire used in this
study. In this way, questions were put onto the questionnaire that candidates have 1) seen before
and therefore most likely have a somewhat structured answer already in their heads that they
have thought about at least once before and 2) resemble the types of question they encounter
from outsiders in everyday life who are curious as to what makes a person want to become an
officer. The goal was to structure the questionnaire in such a way so that it would resemble an
organic conversation candidates might have with another person, but to ask the types of
questions that would avoid the cliché and “automatic”/pre-programmed responses that are often
cited out of convenience.

Questions on the questionnaire ranged from demographic questions, open ended essay
questions, and a process of ranking their top five reasons for wanting to join from a list provided.
These questions included status in the PLC/OCC program, prior enlisted status, age, gender,
religious affiliation, year in school, and if the candidate’s parents obtained a college degree.
Respondents were also asked to list extra-curricular activities they were involved in and any
previous leadership experience. There were then two open ended essay style questions asking
about experiences or events that prepared them or influenced the decision to join the Marine
Corps. Respondents then were asked to choose their top five reasons for wanting to join the
Marines as an Officer from a list of reasons provided, as well as rank these top five on a scale
from one to five, where 1 would indicate the top reason and 5 would indicate their 5th top reason. These values were reverse coded in order to express their weighted and non-weighted value of importance. Respondents were given the option to select “other” as a top five allowing for as much flexibility as possible in order to allow any possible reason to be expressed and articulated. The questionnaire then asks candidates to explain what each of these five selected reasons means to them specifically in an open ended paragraph. Finally, the last question is an open ended question asking respondents to explain why they want to join the Marine Corps as an Officer, various motivations, and what they hope to accomplish. These three types of questions were used to gauge the different motivations and reasons for joining, as well as allowed the respondents to explain what each of their responses means to them personally. The demographic information was used to provide a demographic picture of these respondents as in order to allow for their answers to be grounded in, at least some, context.

Sample and Data Collection

The sample was taken from Marine Corps Officer Candidates at the Officer Selection Office in Chicago, Illinois. At the time of the sampling there were a total of 64 possible respondents in contact with the office. Data was gathered in the form of surveys between September 2012 and January 2013 at monthly meetings call “pool functions” run by the Officer Selection Office (OSO) designed to develop the characteristics needed for success at Officer Candidate School (OCS). These meetings are held monthly or bi-monthly and consist of educational and physical training. At this time candidates and applicants (the subject of my research) were together in one place. As a participant observer, I attended these meetings and distributed surveys after the formal agenda was finished. Before distributing the surveys I informed participants that their participation is voluntary and in no way will affect their status in
the Marine Corps. I also emailed the questionnaire to candidates who were not at the monthly functions, thereby generating as random of a sample of the Chicago candidates as possible. Because there is only one OSO in the Chicago land area, this sample was as representative as it could be of the potential and actual candidates in Chicago which was the intended population.

Data was then synthesized using Excel. The portion of the survey asking candidates to rate their top reasons one through five was reverse coded into the spreadsheet in order to determine which reasons were quantitatively most important. In this way a value of 1 given by a candidate received a weighted value of 5, giving a weighted total. Reasons listed in the top five were also counted with no weight to see which reasons were listed in the top five the most often. Using the computer program, the remaining data was organized and structured in such a way as to be easily accessible to the researcher. Using the quantitative data findings were then interpreted using the qualitative open ended questions to serve as context, definitions, and explanations. The qualitative portions were synthesized to identify patterns as well as common language and meaning. The qualitative and quantitative portions were then used together to offer explanatory insight into the motivations for becoming a Marine Corps Officer where one or the other could not.

**FINDINGS**

**Demographics**

The demographic profile of candidates that is presented in these findings is rather one dimensional. This was not totally unexpected seeing as the sample was drawn from a specific population to begin with, that is college students in the Chicago land area who are attempting to
become Marines. People are partially drawn to the Marine Corps because they are a distinct type of person, and the Marines Corps is looking for a specific type of person as well. This fact alone leads us to expect lower diversity. Not to say that there is not diversity within this population or the one in this study, just that it makes sense that the levels of diversity would be much lower than the population at large. Of the 39 respondents in this study 16 were applicants to the OCS program, 1 junior, 3 seniors, 16 graduates, and 1 no response. By far respondents were either candidates still applying to OCS or candidates who had already completed OCS and were awaiting their official commission. Of the 39 respondents, only two were prior enlisted. This additionally is expected because Marines who are already enlisted that choose to become an officer while still on active duty are not funneled to the same OSO’s that civilians are. Instead their selection process takes place while they are still serving with their unit. Additionally, the vast majority of respondents were either Protestant (n=13) or Catholic (n=16). No respondents reported being Jewish or Mormon, only 2 responded as “other”, and 8 responded other but indicated they were atheist, agnostic, or “none”. Due to this, a “none” category was added to incorporate these respondents. There were only 4 female respondents. The average age of this sample was 22.6 years old. Of the 39 respondents, 22 had one or more parents who held a college degree. The amount of years of school that the respondents reported completing paralleled their status in the OCS program. For example, graduated or senior members reported being graduated or seniors college students as well. Applicants were predominantly freshmen and sophomores in college. There were 4 respondents seeking higher education. These respondents were graduate students attending law school. However, three out of four of these respondents were applicants seeking to get into the Judge Advocate General Program (JAG) and become military lawyers. In summary, the “average” respondent was a 22 or 23 year old
catholic within a year of graduating college, who had never served actively in the military before, had completed a portion of OCS, and who had at least one parent with a college degree.

All of the respondents had been involved with extra-curricular that ranged significantly. Social Fraternities, 4H clubs, sports, academic clubs and teams, volunteering, and political groups were all expressed. What is significant about this, however, is that when asked about leadership roles, it became clear that respondents held leadership positions in their extra-curricular groups as opposed to being a rank-and-file member. These leadership experiences in their pasts while growing up most likely influenced their decision to become an Officer, since officers are commonly referred to as “leaders of Marines”.

Quantitative

The portion of the questionnaire that asked respondents to rank their top five reasons for wanting to join the Marines produced convincing results. The reasons “challenge” and “service to country” were reported in the top five more times than any other reason (27 and 26 respectively), the three next closest reasons were “sense of duty”, “personal development”, and “honor” and “leadership training” which were tied. On the weighted point value scale, where position in the top five determined how much weight a reason received, these results matched. “Service to country”, “challenge”, “sense of duty”, “personal development”, and “honor” comprised the top five. What is interesting is that while “leadership training” was tied for fifth in the non-weighted scale, it drops to seventh when the weighted scale is applied. This suggests that while it is an important reason for most respondents, it was not as important as the others whose weighted and non-weighted value indicates consistent importance. For example, “honor” which has the same amount of appearances in the top five, when rank within the top five is applied to
the scale (weighted) honor stays at 5th while “leadership training” drops to 7th. This means that while both reasons made it into the top five reasons for respondents, “honor” was reported to be more important than “leadership training” within the top five. The following graphs provide visual expression of the quantitative data:

**Graph 1. Weighted value of importance descending.**

Graph 1. Shows weighted value of importance in descending order. Values were reverse coded so that the #1 reason received 5 points and the 5th reason received 1 point.

**Graph 2. Non-weighted value of importance descending.**
Graph 2. Shows non-weighted value of importance (how many times the reason appeared in the top five) in descending order. As can be seen, the weighted order and the non-weighted order are roughly the same, but not exactly. N=39

Graph 3. Weighted value of importance with non-weighted.

Graph 3. Series 1 represents the weighted total of each reach reason rating 1-5. Series 2 represents non-weighted value of importance or the total number time each specific reason was chosen as one of the top five.
Graph 4. Shows the value of the ratio when weighted and non-weighted values are divided. This ratio indicates the weighted score divided by how many times that reason was included as one of the top five reasons. This ratio combines the level of importance within the top five reasons with the amount of respondents who included it as one of their top five reasons. In other words, this graph shows how important a reason was in relation to how many people thought it was one of the top five most important.

In summary, the most important reason for wanting to join the Marines as Officers for this sample and based on the quantitative method used on the questionnaire was service to country if the weighted scale is used and challenge if the non-weighted scale. But level of importance is more than just the amount of times it was reported as a top five reason and more than how many times a reason received a highly weighted value. Ideally the most important reason would be the reason that was in the top five the most and had the highest weighed i.e. the highest weighted value for the most amounts of people, a ratio. But that is not the case here. If a
ratio is used where the weighted is divided by the non-weighted the data becomes skewed in the
direction of the reasons with very low non-weighted values. With three different ways of
interpreting the quantitative data, each giving a different answer, the use of the qualitative data
must be used to decipher or evidence which reason(s) is/are most important to potential Marine
Corps Officers. This data was interpreted to indicate that “Challenge” is the most important
reason. This is because the largest amount of respondents rated this reason as one of their top
five. Since individual ratings of their top five are most likely circumstantial, the total amount of
times a reason was chosen seems, at this point, to be the most telling factor in determining level
of importance. Again, we must look to the qualitative data to see if this hypothesis is supported.

Qualitative

The Top Five

The essay questions on the questionnaire confirm the previous section’s findings. Judging by the responses given from the open ended questions, the challenge of becoming a Marine Corps officer is what attracted many respondents to this path. The top five reasons represented in the quantitative data of “challenge”, “service to country”, “sense of duty”, “personal development”, and “honor” are the primary reasons mentioned and explained in the written responses as well. These reasons then become The Top Five reason of this particular study. Furthermore, the other reasons, when explained, were explained and defined using these Top Five. For example, one responded said that making a difference was an important reason. However, serving one’s country was how he defined “making a difference”. In this way, even the lesser cited motivations were explained by and through the Top Five reasons, further
strengthening their importance. In the sections that follow, I describe how the Top Five reasons were conceptualized among the participants.

**Challenge**

Challenge, is taken to mean testing oneself in an ever changing environment. “Seeing if I have what it takes” is how one respondent put it. A challenge is similar to testing one’s metal in order to see how one reacts under extreme or unfamiliar circumstances. These types of circumstances are seen as only existing in the Marine Corps. This is because military service is seen as something that is in contrast to everyday jobs (“9 to 5’s”) and is the “road less traveled”. Apparently, for many in this sample, no other career or life path would present circumstances in which these individuals would feel they were being challenged in the same way.

Challenge is not just physical, however. There is also a very large theme of mental challenges that are important to the candidates as well. The constantly changing environment is perceived to force mental adaptation, and is associated with a sense of novelty and excitement. There is something exciting about the types of challenges candidates expect to face. Respondents expressed challenge as being associated with being constantly presented with new and difficult things. Being forced to adapt and perform is considered a challenge, and this is what they were after. “Basically I want something to be different every day”, was how another respondent put it. It seems that adventure is also defined through the idea of a challenge. Furthermore, for example, the opposite of a challenge would be “sitting at a desk all day, every day”, in the words of another respondent.

Perhaps the best way to define what challenge is, and why it is something that motivates one to become a Marine is laid out in this statement: “I constantly want to be challenged.”
Challenging myself will help me constantly grow as a person and also learn. I don’t want to do something that is easy or expected. I value a challenge in every aspect and I want to be a part of something that will challenge me every day.” An environment of constant change as well as physical, mental, character growth and testing presents a strong motivation for pursuing the path of a Marine Officer, and ultimately being one.

Service to Country

When questioned about what it means to “serve one’s country” answers were straightforward, yet lacked any type of explanatory language. Clearly, it is easy to draw the intellectual bridge between serving in the military and serving one’s country, and the candidates made this assumption. However, no definition of exactly why service to country is important or valued and why it is a motivational force was present in responses. It was implied. “It’s something I’ve always felt I needed to do”, said one respondent. But there is no explanation of “why”. It seems the question itself is a confusing taboo. This can be seen from the definitions of service to country that respondents gave. Instead of defining or explaining it, their answers represents the mindset that service to country is good in and of itself, it has no real definition, nor does it need one, and that it is just “one of those things that everyone should do if they have the ability”, as the candidates put it.

What was clear is that the explanations and definitions of service to country all held an underlying assumption that service to country is necessary and worthwhile. It needs no definition or explaining, it is simply “one of those things” that everybody sees the value in. Service to country is represented as more of a calling than a choice. This calling was wrapped up in a sense of duty as well.
**Sense of Duty**

Despite citing service to country as a motivation, the urge to serve is best understood as a feeling of duty. “To honor the sacrifice of those who have come before me”, is what one respondent said his duty was. It is not just a duty, for many of the respondents duty equates to a sense of deep calling. Something they felt they needed to do and were meant to do. As one candidate said, “I have always felt some sense of necessity; that I would not feel I had a proper life without this”. For many this sense of duty and service to country go hand in hand. In fact, it would not be inaccurate to say that one motivating element was a deep sense of duty to serve one’s country.

However, most often this sense of duty comes from the past. Respondents hinted at the fact that many others have served before. Now, respondents feel, they must do the same. “Joining the Marine Corps is my personal way of repaying a debt for the opportunities that have been afforded to me”, was a common theme used to explain this deep sense of duty. A calling to the willing and able, as one respondent put it, “I feel that people have to pay for freedom for all. And I’m willing to make that sacrifice.”

**Personal Development**

For respondents, personal development is seen as stemming from the challenges they will be forced to overcome. It is a matter not only of learning in an intellectual sense, but in a character and moral sense as well i.e. life experiences. Development is not in one single area, and it is not about personal advancement. Rather, respondents articulated they sought out the Marine Corps because, like the reasons coming from challenges, they will be forced to grow as a whole person. Many simply put it as, “I want to be the best I can be”. But they recognize that “the best
I can be” does not only mean in one or two ways. The Marine Corps offers not only mental and physical development, but character development as well. All these opportunities for personal development are entwined with the challenges they anticipate. It is the development, not advancement, the challenges and experiences afforded through the Marine Corps that are expressed in this motive.

Honor

Honor is used as throughout the qualitative explanations for joining the Marine Corps. Because of this, one would be led to think that it is not a primary reason for why people decided or wanted to join. However, because it is significantly represented in the quantitative data, it warrants explanation and legitimacy among the reasons. Here is one example of how honor is woven into respondents’ articulations for why they wanted to join the Corps:

“I cannot put exact words on it but there is something intangible about the Marines that led me not just wanting to join the Marine Corps as an office but just wanting to become a Marine. My motivations for applying to OCS is patriotism and love of my country, a sense of duty, the honor involved with being a Marine, the challenge and adventure that goes with it…”

It is not just any honor that the candidate sought, but the honor of being a United State Marine. There is certainly a degree of honor in many different career choices, but the type of honor these candidates sought was involved with the Marine Corps, and the innate honor they felt they would feel from being a part of the organization.

The quote above is a prime example of the somewhat circular relationship between the Marine Corps and the motivation of Honor. Not only is honor referenced, but other Top Five reasons are as well. It seems that this “intangible” thing about the Marines is what brings about the satisfaction of the other reasons, including Honor. In addition to satisfying and presenting a
way to actualize other motivations, the honor that comes from the prestigious nature of the military in our society brings about the opportunity to feel a sense of satisfaction for realizing personal, internal needs. It also brings about a sense of external, societal, acknowledgement that is alluring as well. Moskos admits that a calling, while internally rooted, also enjoys great esteem from the larger community because it is associated with notions of sacrifice, duty, and dedication to one’s role in serving others (Moskos, 1977b). But Honor is not sought for its external, societal gratification. It comes from a deeper feeling that one will be serving a worthwhile, meaningful, and important cause, and that the sacrifices candidates would make would be worth it in the end. Candidates wanted to be a Marine and sought the honor coming from this choice, knowing fully the prestigious nature of the military, but it was not the honor that attracted them in the first place, it was, “the honor involved with being a Marine”.

In addition, the definition of Honor in this sample also contained elements of example setting. In this way, respondents wrote, they saw it necessary to set the example, and do something that others cannot or would not do. This ethos is reflected in the slogan of OCS, “Ductus Exemplo” which means “leadership through example”. This is something that candidates come to internalize as much as the motto of the Marine Corps more generally, Semper Fidelis. For example, one respondent wrote the following, “It leaves a bad taste in my mouth when I see young adults wasting their lives and I want to be on the most far opposite part of that spectrum. I believe it is a very honorable thing to serve one’s country.” In this way, the honor not only adds the benefits of the other motivations, it is something in and of itself that is to be desired. It is a distinguishing factor that not everyone has, and not everyone can get in the minds of candidates. Candidates wanted a way to raise the bar that they observed as dropping among their peers.
CONCLUSION: “Trading Safety for Something We Just Have to Be”

The Core Principles of the Marine Corps are Honor, Courage, and Commitment. These three principles comprise the foundation of everything that the Corps strives to be as an institution and are the three traits it seeks to instill in every one of its members. These traits are indoctrinated into Candidates throughout OCS and are the topic of much discussion and lessons. Candidates come to know that Honor is displayed through integrity, responsibility, and accountability. Courage is having the fortitude to do the right thing, in the right way, for the right reasons. Commitment means nothing else than devotion to the Corps, its principles, and its mission. These are the starting points for almost all military ethics. In the Marine Corps, though, they are one hundred percent salient. I remember chanting them over and over again before being allowed to go to sleep every night at OCS, the sound of them still echoes clearly in my memory, and reminds me of the memories which now ground the actions I take.

But what are these principles if not resembling classical ethical philosophies? The definition of courage steals lines directly from Aristotle’s definition of good. Affirming these principles and upholding them on a personal level contains a great deal of personal sacrifice towards the betterment of the group, it requires it. These are not things that come from a person’s attempting to avoid discomfort and seek ease. Rather, they are the outward signs of a person’s character which is organized in a specific way and makes adhering to these principles a duty and a calling, makes it natural. Explaining himself as a person, one candidate wrote, “Unselfish dedication and devotion to the welfare of others has been at the core of my principles since childhood.” Adhering to these types of ethos transcends each and every response, all the while acknowledging that doing so will be very difficult to do, and spending any amount of time
devoted to doing so will require personal hardship. Candidates know it will not be easy or comfortable. And still many of them seek this out:

“I want to try something out of the ordinary that might get me killed. No one ever remembers the times they were comfortable, warm and boring. People remember risks and actions taken. Whenever you do something you run the risk of failing, but if you never try, you already lost.”

A more powerful truth that each of these candidates believes is that in doing so it will also be worth it. “I want to have a sense of accomplishment”, one candidate said. “I want to do the hardest thing there is.” Another wrote, “OCS was the hardest thing I’ve ever done, and I know I’ll have to do something harder in the future. The challenges I’ll face will allow for the personal development I [want].” Wanting to do the “hardest thing there is” would baffle anyone thinking through any type of analytical, Hobbesian, lens. It would, however, charm classical thinkers.

Many candidates explained the motivation for wanting to join the Corps as a “feeling” or a “calling”. One candidate described his sense of duty as, “Hearing the ‘Call’… is the best way I’ve heard it described. It is impossible to explain to someone who has never felt that way about anything, but those who have can understand that it is the feeling to one’s very core that they are meant to do something specific.” Another said, “I have always felt some sense of necessity; that I would not feel I had a proper life without this”. For these candidates, it is something “they just had to be”. It transcends words, and when the words come out, they make is sound unspeakably lame. I know because I’ve experienced this very thing. Another candidate told me, “I think the best way I can truly describe the entire decision and desire to join boils down to… while I can’t exactly define it… it just feels right”. “I know it will probably be the most difficult thing I will have to do and it will only get harder [after OCS], but what else am I going to do?”, posed a
candidate. Acknowledging this, another wrote, “It feels like a calling and deep down inside, I feel like I’m doing not only what I want to do, but the right thing…” This calling is something that drives the sense of duty. One candidate even went so far as to say, “It would be a waste of my strength, speed, and leadership traits to not serve.” Suggesting that not taking this path would be the wrong thing to do, in a categorical sense.

In the end, it is the values of the institution of the United States Marine Corps that motivated these candidates to want to become a part of this unique war fighting family. Values that are contained in the various mottos of the Corps, in the Core Principles, and in the normative ethical standards each member is held to on a daily basis. Examples of this are countless within this sample, but each response highlights and cites institutional values for wanting to join. Perhaps the most revealing, and most moving account of motivations for pursuing this lofty path come from one candidate’s personal story of deciding to become an Officer. It is stories like this that give us the greatest sense of what it means to serve, and what it means to honor the sacrifices of others.

“While my package was being processed [application to go to OCS] I was selected to go to Afghanistan with another reserve unit- I jumped onboard as soon as I could. My CO [Commanding Officer], upon hearing of my intent to deploy, pulled me aside and had one of the most memorable heart-to-heart talks I can remember about being an officer and enlisted. He explained to me what he thought I should do and fully-backed whatever I choose to do (a Captain was asking a PFC what he’d like to do- unheard of!). He gave me two hours to think about it, I came back 30 minutes later and told him I was going to OCS. I was selected and sent to OCS. The Marine that took my slot hit an IED [Improvised Explosive Device]… my commitment to the Marine Corps was strengthened with greater resolve. I owe it to that Marine to not let this opportunity fall to the ground.”

Take a second to let that story sink in. The motivations of this young man cannot come from any other place than a deep adherence to the very values that lie at the core of the Marines.
as an institution, mostly a deeply felt commitment to the institution and the Marine that took his place. Other candidates also expressed acknowledging the sacrifices others have made. Be it of lives, or of time, energy, or a life spent working towards a higher and greater good; a *summum bonum* that allegedly didn’t exist in thinkers like Hobbes’s eyes.

Heeding the warning posed by Charles Moskos in 1977 I asked what is it that makes Marine Officer Candidates want to become Marine Officers in the first place. I found that our young Marine Corps Officer Candidates are motivated by deeply internalized values, the very values that the institutional of the Marine Corps upholds. Candidates find that the Marine Corps satisfies their internal values and philosophies, gives them direction and a foundation through which to channel themselves. It offers them a way to play out in reality their own core principles in a deeply and profoundly meaningful way. The words of one candidate summarize this exact point, “The Corps provides an outlet and direction for my energy. It channels them towards a useful and meaningful goal.” For this candidate, as for many others it is the acknowledging of a greater good that makes this chosen path “meaningful”.

What kind of individuals are our militaries getting, what kind of Officer Candidates is our Marine Corps getting? Candidates in this study are motivated by a common vision of fulfilling whatever role they can within an institution that will utilize their unique abilities and experiences and channel them collectively towards a profoundly meaningful, if not the most meaningful, goal there could be. It is this belief that ties them all together. The belief that serving their country in the highest way each individual is capable of is the highest good in which a citizen can partake. They are individuals who internalize the same meanings and values of words like service, duty, honor, and challenge. In short, they are individuals that are categorically different from their peers and have distinguished themselves as such throughout their lives. They have been high
achievers in all of their past activities, gotten high marks throughout their academic careers, were successful competitors, and actively sought out challenges from wherever they could find them. It is these experiences that lead them to do the “hardest thing possible”. In statements like this we see connection between a sense of “calling” that cannot be ignored and a person’s, perhaps as Aristotle suggested thousands of years ago.

But still, candidate motivations do not reflect a senseless naiveté either. Rather, what emerged from the written responses was a profoundly deep, yet complicated system of rationalization for wishing to partake on a path that will require so much of themselves. What emerged was evidence of deep and critical thought regarding what they all had chosen to set out to do, a picture far from the stereotypical “jarhead”. This should come as a relief, because as Officers, it will be their job to understand the reasons why. The reasons why they are doing what they are doing; the reasons why the wars are fought; the reasons why they and the men they will lead will be asked to do certain things, possibly terrible things, on the behalf of others; and the reasons that somehow make it all worth it in the end. What emerged was a group of individuals who recognize this gravity of this role, but also its necessity. What emerged was a group of individuals who deep down, simply or not so simply, needed to fulfill this role.

Wider theoretical Grounding

The motivations cited by candidates in this project paint the picture of an institutionally motivated individual. The types of individuals Moskos, and many others after him, have said are critical to the future success of our nation’s militaries. The larger question of what motivates humans to do anything, what makes us tick, has brought one realization to bear. That is the work of Christian Smith. In a book published in 2003, Moral, Believing Animals, Smith provided a
detailed account of “Living Narratives”, or “forms of communication that arranges human actions and events into organized wholes” (Smith 2003). Over all, the findings outlined above find context within the idea of these Narratives as guiding, grounding, and defining all human action. From what the data tells, the argument can be made that what links all the motivations and reasons for wanting to join the Marine Corps is the common adherence to similar systems of belief and meaning, values and norms. Such salient elements possibly stem from an example Smith uses, which is common in American culture, “The American Experiment Narrative” (Smith, 2003). This narrative tells those beneath it that, “Through bravery, ingenuity, determination, and goodwill our forebears forged…America… a new hope for prosperity and liberty. It deserves our honor, our devotion, and possibly the commitment of our very lives for its defense” (Smith, 2003).

The ambiguity that was often revealed in the responses from candidates regarding deeper meanings behind their motivations begin to make sense in the light of these “living narratives”. Because Narratives are often held at the level of beliefs and values, they are often unconsciously adhered to and largely invisible to both respondent and researcher attempting to understand the aspect of human behavior tied to them. In a Durkheimian sense, living narratives are overarching stories we consciously or unconsciously believe and buy into in order to give life meaning and context. In this study in fact, the argument could be made that what links the respondents’ varied answers, the common thread that runs beneath the surface of all their meanings, is that they are, at least seemingly, adhering, explaining, and living out the “American Experiment Narrative”, in which through strong will and bravery a person can and ought to make a better life for themselves and the persons around them (Smith, 2003). It seems sociologists have stumbled upon the golden part of the soul that Plato saw when he wrote the Republic.
What remains to be seen is if these living narratives can be linked to the public narratives used in Hobbes’s commonwealth on used as Plato’s “Noble lie”. Are these narratives empty stories we convince ourselves of so that life can go on, or do they reflect the true and deep meanings of life that we all recognize as some point or another? This question will remain, but I believe that it is the later answerer will become the more widely accepted one, the one we begin to base our societies and institutions off of.

Coming full circle back to the ideas generated by thinkers such as Hobbes and Plato, the findings of this study not only support the claims Plato made in the Republic but found context within them. Claims such as justice being realized through the group not the individual, and that the happiness of the individual is only attainable through the happiness and proper ordering of the large group shape the narratives of today’s “guardians” as they did those of the ancient Utopia. The motivations that Hobbes considered to ground all human actions, such as fears and desire for ease and comfort, do not explain the accounts provided by the candidates in this study. These results point out serious gaps in such analytical philosophies. They stand to deny that everything in our world traces back to rational, analytical, and self-interested choices. We all acknowledge, and this study confirms, that much of our experience involves pro-social and self-less behavior. Notwithstanding their limits, this stands to confirm, or at least remind us, that the ideas which emerged from classical philosophies can, and in this case do, help us make better sense of our human experiences.

*Future Research*

In terms of methods, future research ought to be aimed at producing more participant observation and ethnographic accounts of the motivations of these types of individuals in order
to get at the deeply internalized reasons for acting in the manner studied in this project. This study suffered from sampling issues. The small number of participants and the homogeneity of the candidates in this study did not translate into easily generalizable results. I would still defend my findings, however. The fact that the motivations found here will still be very relevant in any group of Marine Corps Officer Candidates due to the nature of the Marine Corps and they type of person it attracts. Still, future accounts ought to seek out larger and more random samples, but not abandon using informal interviews that might offer more detailed explanations as to the types of reasons for wanting to join the Marines. Combining such methods would no doubt bring about the deepest level of understanding.

Furthermore, as has been seen, interesting theoretical correlations were observed between the salience of these “narratives” and propensities to behave in certain ways. Especially when actions that uphold the source of these narratives are considered, like military service, the salience of narratives might become a primary factor in what motivates this type of pro-social behavior. Future research should be aimed at identifying if this variance brings about a change in propensities to serve and what factors provide the foundations of certain narratives becoming salient in the first place i.e. religion or cultural context. I would also challenge future research to compare these “narratives” with the idea of a “noble lie” that Plato discusses in his Republic. Furthermore, given the nature of military service, I challenge future research to utilize the specific experiences of military men and women to shed light on the subject of human motivation. I challenge others to attempt to tie their findings into a larger philosophical discussion which applies to human nature more in general, and the countless other existential questions we perpetually contemplate.
References


*The Republic*. Plato.
