

# **A Diverse Young Man's Pursuit of the American Dream: From West Point Cadet to Army Officer and Professor**

*By Remi M. Hajjar*

This auto-ethnography tells the story of how a culturally diverse young boy from a working-class family paved a path towards the American Dream (i.e., the upper middle-class) through West Point, serving as a career Army officer and becoming a professor. The piece begins with a discussion of auto-ethnography, and how this retrospective self-analysis fits into that genre of scholarly work. The article then defines cross-cultural competence, which serves as a central theme for this auto-ethnography that explains how life experiences influenced me to become a cultural bridge across diverse groups. The personal narrative begins with discussions about my childhood community, culturally diverse family, and other early life formative experiences including the path to becoming a West Point cadet. The paper also discusses how my relationship formed with a young woman who eventually would become my wife of 27 years, and the mother to our two daughters. The piece then reflects on my cadet experiences, including some discussion about events that unfolded linked to my cultural background. The auto-ethnography recounts some of the highlights of my professional and personal life path during a 27-year career as an Army officer, explaining how structures and cultures of my past shaped choices during the journey.

This contribution helps to reveal how my life experiences as a culturally diverse person shaped me into a cultural bridge that seeks to connect different people. The narratives discuss some of the structural and cultural processes that influenced me, my missteps and resulting lessons learned, junctures in my life where I accepted recruitment (i.e., football, West Point, US Army, academia) and also places where I rejected such influences. The paper culminates with some discussion about my current roles as a father, husband, and academy professor, and how I continue to cultivate my life niche as a cultural bridge. It expresses my hope that my daughters, students, the US, and our diverse world will seek to build more harmony.

## **Literature Review**

### **What is an Auto-Ethnography?**

After reviewing literature about auto-ethnography, I feel like I have a sense for some of the tensions among social scientists about this research method. On the one hand, some scholars think that auto-ethnographies do not qualify as a valid or useful form of research and science. Some of their arguments and criticisms include that auto-ethnographies divulge narcissistic tales about individuals with too much subjectivity,<sup>1</sup> a lack of intellectual rigour,<sup>2</sup> incoherent research methods (how can a single person serve as scientist, author and subject?), ethical quandaries, and debates about the role of theory and literature in such

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<sup>1</sup> Fine, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Delamont, 2007 ; Delamont, 2009.

personalized narratives. I think these criticisms and questions, among others, merit reflection for the community of scholars who believe in the scientific value of auto-ethnography.

Proponents of auto-ethnography argue that deep subjective reflection about one's life path, which links to or creates theory, constitutes useful qualitative research.<sup>3</sup> I think auto-ethnography connects to a classic premise about the value of sociology, which is the cultivation of a sociological imagination. In my auto-ethnography, for example, my sociological imagination helps me uncover linkages between my biography and history.<sup>4</sup> How could a quality personal and academic self-reflection ensue without significant, systematic exploration of different people, groups, historical times, situational nuances, and other unique factors about the social world? How did the subject react to and in some cases mould her social circumstances (agency), and how did the environment shape and influence the auto-ethnographer (structure and culture)? When auto-ethnographies enable the subject to link the micro- to the meso- and macro-worlds, provide the conceptual space to reflect about one's life in a way that brings personal and communal academic meaning, and reflect a systematic attempt to comprehend parts of their lives in a coherent manner, I think auto-ethnographies represent valid qualitative research. The idea of applying a systematic academic method to creatively reflect upon and explain some evocative, personal narratives motivated me to pursue this approach.<sup>5</sup> I hope those who read this paper find that it brings value as qualitative research to the body of knowledge and in other meaningful ways. I pursued this project because this method provides a compelling view into the world, particularly how culture and structure shapes peoples' lives – and in this case, my own life path of becoming a cultural bridge for different diverse people. Ultimately, using auto-ethnography helps to explain my actions and decisions during my journey.<sup>6</sup>

### **What is Cross-Cultural Competence<sup>7</sup>?**

This article defines cross-cultural competence as the knowledge, attitudes, and behavioural repertoire and skill sets that people require to accomplish all given tasks involving cultural diversity. I have studied this topic as it pertains to the military, but cross-cultural competence is also relevant to people in many other fields of work and life. Cross-cultural competence consists of two major subparts: culture-general factors and culture-specific factors. The culture-general factors make the foundation of cross-cultural competence, consisting of the core attitudes, skill sets, and knowledge basis that facilitate adaptation to multiple diverse contexts over time. Culture-general factors include comprehending the meaning of culture, sufficient cultural self-awareness, an understanding of how to analyze different cultures and structures (i.e., religion, class, race, ethnicity,

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<sup>3</sup> Campbell, 2017 ; Walls, 2016 ; Ellis & Bochner, 2000.

<sup>4</sup> Mills, 2000.

<sup>5</sup> Wall, 2008 ; Ellis & Bochner, 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Duncan, 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Hajjar, 2010.

gender, and myriad other dimensions), and a repertoire of relevant skills (i.e., communication, negotiation, leadership, followership, and others). The culture-specific factors of cross-cultural competence consist of the necessary attitudes, skills, and knowledge sets that enable effective performance in a given country, task, or situation characterized by significant cultural diversity. Culture-specific competence comes from sufficient immersion in a given culture, and requires persistent practice (like maintaining fluency in a foreign language). People and groups wishing to succeed in our interconnected world cultivate cross-cultural competence, including the culture-general and the culture-specific factors.

This auto-ethnography will illustrate how many of my life experiences reveal my gradual growth of cross-cultural competence, culminating with the realization that this topic serves as an essential part of my life. As I reflect on my upbringing, I realize that positive and loving relationships with different parts of my very diverse family caused me to learn cross-cultural competence during my journey. Professionally, establishing positive relationships with unique groups – some of which distrust each other (i.e., some parts of academia and the military) – has also required me to acquire cross-cultural competence. This concept helps to explain how I came to serve as a cultural bridge across different groups. There were painful and sharp lessons, times of real discomfort, mistakes, and other necessary maturation processes that led me to become adept in different, diverse contexts. This auto-ethnography allows me to share some examples of how the structures and cultures of my life taught me cross-cultural competence, and how I serve as a cultural bridge and in turn influence others to learn cross-cultural competence.

## **Who am I?**

I am “Remi” (a strongly preferred nickname), but my legal name is Maurice Sherif Hajjar. I am an American of Jewish and Arabic heritage who was raised by a single parent (Mom) in Wheaton, Illinois, which is a western suburb of Chicago. I am a Dad to two teenage daughters, and a husband (for 27 years). Professionally, I am an active-duty Army officer with deployment experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq. Currently, I serve as an academy professor, associate professor, and as the sociology programme director at the US Military Academy (USMA) at West Point, New York. I have served in the Army for 27 years, and I hold the rank of colonel. One of my major projects as an academy professor and academic more broadly entails researching, writing about, and teaching people about cross-cultural competence. This auto-ethnography will explore parts of my life story to answer the question, Who am I?, and show how and why cross-cultural competence has become an essential part of my journey.<sup>8</sup> This auto-ethnography also explains how the structures and cultures of my life influenced me to pursue the American Dream (making it to the upper middle-class) through joining the Army, first as a West Point cadet, and then as a career Army officer who eventually became a professor.

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<sup>8</sup> Vasconcelos, 2011.

## **Childhood Reflections**

I grew up as the only child to a single parent in a non-Christian and working-class family in Wheaton, Illinois, in the 1970s and 1980s. Although my mom holds a bachelor's degree, she remained a pre-kindergarten teacher and part-time play director during my youth. I recognize the admirable nature of the work she has provided to thousands of young souls in her career. But as my father reminded me as a teenager and young adult, she could have received welfare if she applied for it. Despite my father's financial support (post-divorce alimony), my mom and I experienced persistent financial strains. Money was always tight. She and I comprised a working-class family who lived in a middle-class town of about 50,000 people, which is a suburb of Chicago, Illinois.

I learned to assume responsibility and contribute to the family early in life. I took a paper route as a child, and as a teenager I worked at fast food places throughout high school to augment our family's financial resources. I worked at Arby's for several years and became a night manager in my senior year of high school. Working during high school enabled me to afford a wardrobe that rivalled my middle-class peers' attire. Wearing clothes that matched my middle-class peers helped me conform, feel like part of the in-group (a "preppy-athlete" on my high school's most prominent sports team – the football team), and mitigate some of the shame and stigma suffered from earlier years of teasing and being out-grouped – some of which stemmed from wearing cheaper clothing (such as Sears brands, like Toughskins jeans). Upon reflection, I realize that my life experiences in two classes have caused me to draw on different codes in order to remain connected to different people including my current middle-class community and colleagues and also some working-class members of our extended families. This class-based code-switching is a more subtle, but no-less-relevant aspect of cross-cultural competence; having strong ties with diverse people from different social classes hinges on it. I also recognize in hindsight that the structure and culture of my middle-class community forged my determination to conform and fit in – to avoid working-class marginalization and blue-collar life stressors.

## **The Animals**

As a young kid I enjoyed the five cats and dog that lived in our small Wheaton home. Once a favourite cat of mine, Orca, got together with (I think the current millennial jargon would be "hooked up with") one of our male cats. So Orca had kittens when I was around 9-10 years old. That was special. But as I entered my early teen years, I realized the number of animals we had was not normal. Our home, with its animal hair and odour, was an embarrassing anomaly in my peer group – it was clearly deviant. My mom's boyfriend and his own mom had many more animals (mainly cats) than we did. As an adult I now recognize my mom fell in love with another animal hoarder. I wish I could say the joys of my youth (before the middle school years) stemming from having all the animals could overshadow some very real and lasting pains we have suffered from their animal hoarding diseases. But saying that would not be truthful. Their disease remains in full throttle in their senior years (they are currently in their 70s), and it has strained their lives and relationships – including ours. This disease exacerbates their working-class struggles; for

example, they cannot financially afford to care for so many cats and animals, and the physical requirements will eventually become too overwhelming for two senior citizens. Experiencing this dysfunctional and painful part of my parents' lives also contributed to my quest to achieve upward mobility and more life peace, balance, and security. This experience also taught me how to maintain bonds with loved ones who suffer from afflictions, which includes cultivating understanding, skills to maintain our relationship such as an ability to create necessary boundaries, and other insights that have helped me build relations with people.

### **Mom: Director, Teacher and Movie Aficionado**

A strong parental influence in my life was my mom. This comment does not intend to dismiss the significant impact of my biological father, stepdad, or stepmom on my youth and upbringing, but I lived with my mom for 18 years and have maintained a lifelong relationship with her (my biological father passed away in 1998). For five decades and counting, my 77-year-old mom has been a teacher and director of dramatic productions, mainly for younger kids. I realize now that her influences probably contributed to why I pursued the role of teacher and developer of people, and my appreciation for the arts – especially cinema. I recall seeing many movies with my mom, and to this day we enjoy discussing their meanings.

I have taught two different courses using movies as a major learning vehicle, and other courses with lessons that used movies to highlight theories. Currently, I teach cinematic images of war and the military to sociology majors in their senior year at West Point. We watch a new movie every week, and use a two-hour class block to analyze the movies for sociological, military, personal, societal, and other meanings. As a teacher, I find the intellectual stimulation that comes from trying to interpret, analyze, debate, and communicate about films as compelling educational subject matter. I think watching and analyzing movies helps students and teachers to learn about the world, American and global culture, the military, myriad societal topics (i.e., the increasing role of women and other minority groups in the military, and also in new places and spaces across society), and ourselves. Of the many sociological, personal, and professional insights we share in class, our dissection of cinema often lets students uncover the relevance of cross-cultural competence. Cadets discuss, analyze, and reconcile how different cultures collide and coexist, and how people from different races, ethnicities, religions, political viewpoints, physical abilities and disabilities, sexual orientations and genders, and social classes exist in society. This enriches cadets' academic education, self-awareness, and professional repertoires as budding Army officers who will lead and unite diverse soldiers to work well together, and then travel worldwide with their units to successfully interact with foreign cultures.

### **The Impact of My Diverse and Minority Background**

My upbringing as a diverse community member yielded some interesting cultural and structural lessons. As a non-Christian family in the highly Christian community of

Wheaton, Illinois, we received mixed community support that included warmth and critical judgement, and numerous overt and covert attempts at proselytization. For example, one day after a little league game a teammate's father invited my mom and me to an ice cream shop. After treating us to ice cream, we received a religious recruitment pitch – which was the main reason we got treated to ice cream. Many times since that happened, mom reminded me of that story and how it angered her. Another example of how we experienced strains of being non-Christian (a religious minority) emerged in our relationship with another working-class family. That family had three boys and a single parent mom. The middle son was my age. Our families became very close when I was young, and I often hung out with the boys from that family. That family's strong Christian identity became a point of negotiated tension in our relationship. My mom and I didn't pray before meals when we ate together, but we respected their prayers. We didn't attend Sunday church services, and that family eventually realized that nudging us to join them for those services created tensions. Over time that family used more subtle and occasional attempts to proselytize us, and eventually stopped trying. My mom and the other mom remain friends to this day. I learned from this experience that friends can erect boundaries – in our case around differing views on religion – and still remain friends. This was an important lesson learned as a very young person that seeded my development of cross-cultural competence, and as future parts of this paper reveal, helped me to befriend and bond with different people throughout my life.

After my parents separated when I was about five years old, I visited my father on most weekends. The exceptions included his foreign business trips, which sometimes lasted 6-12 months. For most of my youth, I visited father on Sundays, and those visits provided wonderful cross-cultural insights and development. Enjoying Syrian (Arabic) cuisine, learning about the culture and language, and experiencing a tiny slice of life inside a middle-class Arabic American (and Muslim) family all eventually created a nuanced, diverse self. I enjoyed seeing my younger (half) sisters, who remain a very special part of my life. Visiting my Arabic-American father's side of the family enriched my maturity by teaching me how to navigate different structures and cultures – those of a White Christian community, and those of an Arab-American and Muslim family and community. In retrospect I see how those rich experiences began to mould me into a cultural bridge. However, as a younger person, I recall hiding my ethnic background from my peers. I experienced intense, multi-layered teasing from about third grade to eighth grade in the highly culturally homogeneous community of Wheaton, Illinois, where my diversity stood out. Some of the teasing linked to my working-class background (i.e., cheaper clothes and an older, smaller home), some because I was overweight, and some because of my ethnic uniqueness.

Luckily for me, the kids at my Wheaton schools in the 1970s and 1980s didn't know the litany of Arabic and Muslim slurs heard in contemporary times (i.e., towel head, rag head, camel jockey, terrorist, sand N-word, and many others). One term I recall my peers teasing me with was "Gypsy" or "Gypsy Boy". I think this slur reflected my peers'

ignorance about my background. Deploying that word represented their attempt to “other me” by placing me in a group of foreign, marginalized, and untrustworthy outcasts of darker skin complexion and a lower class and status. Although painful to experience at the time, this teasing helped me feel and remember the impact of minority group stigmatization. This benefits me as an Army officer serving diverse soldiers, as a parent, and also in my current professional role as the director of a sociology majors programme heavily populated by minority cadets. Many of those minority cadets experienced out-grouping in their lives and seek to understand the reasons why this happens, and to help prevent it. The structures and cultures of my upbringing helped forge empathy along my journey to become an inclusive cultural bridge in my life.

I lived on a block of unincorporated Wheaton on the north side of town in my youth. Our working-class neighbours included a Hmong family, an African-American family, and several Caucasian families. On my block, there were warm and friendly neighbours, others who were less positive, and some who posed real threats to my family. One dangerous local influence was a troubled Vietnam veteran who lived two houses away from ours. This young black man (probably in his late 20s or early 30s), who was one of probably four adult children who lived in that home, would sometimes pound on our front door – often late at night. This occurred from time-to-time, and in retrospect probably caused great anxiety for my mom and me. I don’t know if she called the man’s family or police to get him to stop. Since I do not recall the police coming to our home, I’ll assume she called his dad or family. Much later in life my wife told me my mom confided in her years ago that that young man who used to pound on our front door may have assaulted my mom at some point. My mom never directly told me this, but she has indirectly alluded to a few painful stories of assaults over the years.

My mom’s boyfriend also would sometimes pound on our front door – when he was drunk. I was around 10 when my mom started dating her second and current husband of 31 years. He was helpful to us in many ways when his alcoholism didn’t bring out his darker side ; he’s been sober for about 30 years. He helped us to care for our yard, encouraged me to play sports, and provided a helpful second parenting hand. For example, when I treated my mom with disrespect during my adolescence, I recall our very beneficial conversations (the three of us) that caused me to reflect on the pain I caused mom during my rebellious early teen years. My stepdad’s mom became an active grandmother in my life who helped influence my love of nature, patience, and reaching out to new and different people (as she did to my mom and me). She helped my interpersonal development. Grandma Dru (Drucilla) suffered a serious stroke in my junior year of high school, and 13 painful years later she died in a nursing home.

Wheaton provided a plethora of positive influences beyond my parents. Coaches, friends’ parents, teachers, and others moulded me in a generally positive way. Despite some of the challenges from the structures and cultures encountered in Wheaton, the city also provided benefits for young people. I recall friends’ parents helping to guide and develop me when I stepped out of line. For example, on two occasions, the father of my

best friend from middle school spoke to me face-to-face about unacceptable behaviour on his property (he had my mom's approval to do so). I ruined some of his precious plants and bushes and did not initially own responsibility for the "joke" of riding my bike through part of his garden. He was patient, direct, and helped me to see and own my misstep. I learned valuable lessons from these moments of mentorship and socialization from communal parenting; thus, the cliché fits: it does take a village to properly rear young people. Further, I realize that my Wheaton schools are part of District 200, which remains a well-reputed school district in the generally affluent DuPage County of Illinois. Sociologically, I realize growing up in such a community helped to shape the conditions for my life trajectory and upward mobility. Many of my community's structures and cultures caused me to work very hard to achieve a middle-class lifestyle, and counter-balanced some of the other potentially destructive influences in my life. These experiences helped teach me about crossing cultures and social classes, which also shaped my cultural bridge life niche.

### **Finding Love**

In the summer before my senior year of high school, I re-met a young woman I had briefly met a few years prior. We went on a few dates, and our relationship blossomed – even as a long-distance relationship, given she was in college out-of-state. Five years later, my girlfriend graduated from Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois, a few weeks before I graduated from West Point on May 29, 1993. When I reflect on why we met, stayed together, and decided to get married, I think sociology helps explain our choice. Our working-class family backgrounds helped create feelings of mutual comfort after both of us experienced some class-related out-grouping in Wheaton, Illinois. Furthermore, neither of our families practiced Christianity, which created another form of out-grouping we experienced in a highly Christian town. So we felt another form of bonding through our religious minority statuses. We were also a case of opposites attracting, based on our personalities, body types, and individual idiosyncrasies. I think our differences created mutual excitement and attraction in our early years. Over 27 years of marriage (and 32 years of our relationship), I can say that the same points that bonded us in our youth remain relevant, though our case of opposites getting married carries less novelty as middle-aged parents than it did during the exciting "cocktail hour" of our first few years together. Despite some of the tensions that exist due to our personality differences, we have remained committed to each other and our family. We have experienced upward mobility from the working-class to the upper middle-class.<sup>9</sup> When we visit our extended families in Illinois, I am often reminded of our blue-collar upbringings and life. We have a very few family members in the upper middle-class, but each time we visit our extended families in Illinois we get a fresh and robust reminder of the working-class and lower middle-class life.

Mainly, during these visits to our families, I'm very thankful we're not endlessly worrying about bills, debts, healthcare insurance, trying to maintain small and dilapidated

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<sup>9</sup> Bourdieu, 1984.



houses, frequent bouts of unemployment, and that we have financial security and a plan that should enable our children to attend universities after high school – and not wind up with massive debts that accompany their diplomas. Although all classes struggle with substance abuse, these visits remind me to be appreciative that we are not cigarette smokers or alcoholics who suffer from major health issues. Nonetheless, at times I miss parts of the simplicity, forthrightness, and seeming comfort that come from blue-collar culture and pride. I often find upper working-class people more straightforward, honest, and comfortable in their status than some inhabitants of the middle-class who suffer from anxiety, an obsession with impression management, and other neurotic efforts to confirm they belong in a privileged community. Thus, although I appreciate the security, status, and professional work and benefits of the middle-class, my eyes are open to some of its potential pitfalls that include judgment, out-grouping and exclusion, ultra-politeness (superficiality), and other annoying fixations.<sup>10</sup> For example, some middle-class people's obsession to accumulate higher status symbols to "keep up with the Joneses" strikes me as an undesirable and unhealthy aspect of some privileged people's lives. These parts of middle-class life reveal part of the façade or downside of the American Dream (i.e., upper middle-class or upper-class).

Returning the focus to my marriage, my relationship has taught me that emotional intelligence<sup>11</sup> and cross-cultural competence are vital ingredients for a marriage to succeed over time. Despite our sociological similarities, our personality and sex and gender-based differences create a constant need to try hard to communicate well and understand each other. We generally interact well with each other's diverse families, but realize it takes constant effort to build and sustain relationships with new and different people – especially as a military family that has moved nine times and lived in 12 different houses over the past 27 years. Seeking common ground has kept us together and helped us adapt to many different situations.

Parenting two teenage daughters who currently are 18 and 16 years of age, who bring wonderful things and high emotional intensity to our family life, has only added to our need to compromise, communicate, and seek common ground. I realize that for us to maintain close relationships with our daughters – and their potential future partners and close friends – we will need to draw on cross-cultural competence to understand, learn from, and love across generations (Generation X parents and Generation Z kids). For example, I enjoy dialogue with my daughters that teach me how to reap the benefits of different social media, and simultaneously I communicate my belief that in-person relationships are most valuable – and that excessive social media use threatens the health of people and society. I hope our future holds in store good marital and family health, and perhaps a golden anniversary celebration with our diverse family. This will require a persistent cultivation of cross-cultural competence.

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<sup>10</sup> Fussell, 1992.

<sup>11</sup> Goleman, 1995.

## **Reflections about Playing High School Football: Proving Grounds for the Military**

I benefited from joining my high school football team, a perennial powerhouse in Illinois at the time. A former Marine Corps officer, Coach “Rex” (James Rexilius, Sr.), served as the team’s head coach, and several other football coaches helped my growth. I reaped the football programme’s benefits of discipline, hard work, physical fitness, followership, leadership, and myriad other values and skills, which subsequently served me well as a West Point cadet. I now realize playing football for the Wheaton North Falcons would begin to prepare me to attend a military academy and serve as an Army officer. Being in that football programme developed middle-class orientations, and an emphasis on the student-athlete-leader concept. Playing on that team also mandated year-round sports participation. For players who did not play sports besides football, the coaches expected players to join its off-season weight-lifting team. Playing football and regularly lifting weights (and a growth spurt) helped me get much physically stronger and fit, enhanced my self-confidence, sparked a life habit of working out, and also brought a sharp decline to my teasing in my freshman year. Our football programme also assigned senior players as mentors to younger players in the programme to help them navigate high school life and learn about the team. Players’ backgrounds did not matter much ; players’ work ethic, teamwork, rule following, and performance determined team membership and who played in specific positions.

Not everything about playing four years of high school football and two years of football in a full-tackle intramural league at West Point was beneficial. One example of a potential cost includes the growing scientific linkages between playing football and brain diseases. Will my teammates and I prematurely suffer from such diseases ? I know our coaches meant well, but they invested heavily in hitting drills to create toughness and good technical form. One of my classmates was a star three-sport athlete on our football team, and he still harbours anger towards our coaches for not knowing what to do with him after a very violent hitting drill (part of a team ritual called “bull in the ring”) clearly left him concussed. I also think playing on the school’s dominant team may have also taught some of the players some other troubling life lessons. I wonder to what extent the team’s role at our school perpetuated inequality linked to gender and sexuality, religion (the team had a Christian emphasis), and other factors. For example, the presence of women cheerleaders rooting on the side-lines for the school’s all-male football team, as compared to the school’s women’s sports without any cheerleaders, symbolically reinforced traditional gender roles, stereotypes and structures. My sociological imagination has opened my eyes to some of these potential pitfalls of my football experiences. In sum, my high school football experiences served as a socialization experience that influenced me to choose to attend a military academy and join the Army, and contributed to my drive to achieve upward mobility. I was not out-grouped for being working-class or culturally diverse, but rather encouraged to work hard and develop as a student-athlete-leader to benefit the team, school, and community.

I did not know the US Military Academy existed until my junior year of high school when my football coach introduced the idea of applying to West Point. He recognized my working-class background, work ethic, academic achievement, leader skills, and personality type, and helped me to make a life-changing choice. I discovered one of my football teammates had an older sister who was a cadet, and his father and grandfather had graduated from West Point. So I learned more information from that family. My mom and I diligently managed the application process, which included getting a congressional nomination. My high school connections and lessons learned from teachers, coaches, and family members who helped my development over the years and endorsed my application to West Point proved beneficial. I also look back at this part of my story and realize it energizes me when I have the chance to give back and help young people contemplate their futures and seek their dreams. Myriad former and current students (including many minorities and working-class young people) seek my advice and letters of recommendation regarding careers, graduate school, the chance to teach at West Point, academic majors, Army inquiries (i.e., I am often asked about balancing family and Army life, and about different Army branches and posts), and other questions about their futures and life aspirations. I enjoy listening, advising, and helping young people to dream and flourish.

### **Some Experiences as a West Point Cadet**

Although my high school football team was run like a quasi-military unit at times, reporting to West Point shocked me! Unlike some of my more fortunate peers who visited the Academy in advance to get a feel for the place, my first time visiting West Point was when I reported for basic training on June 28, 1989. Unlike some of my classmates who had prior military service or actual para-military experiences, such as participation in a high school Junior Reserve Officer-in-Training Corps (JROTC) programme, or who had military family members who socialized them about some basic military customs, courtesies, how to wear uniforms, and so on, I had no concrete military experiences or skills (i.e., how to shine a pair of boots or shoes). I felt behind many of my classmates during cadet basic training, but I reflectively know the point of that training is to make as many new cadets feel that way as possible – at least initially. In that summer I learned the basics from how to wear uniforms, make a bed military-style, fire different weapons, ruck march, exercise (i.e., do physical training or “PT” – the West Point way), memorize and recite numerous songs and other historical knowledge credos and artifacts about West Point (my favourite remains, “The Definition of Leather,” and my plebe year roommate and I remain close friends who require each other to keep that piece memorized – and we test one another whenever we get together), and other information about the Academy and Army.

On a few occasions my cultural minority status led to some special attention during my four-year tenure as a West Point cadet. Several cadets, including my supervisor cadets on a few occasions, tried to proselytize me. I attended different Christian services, heard upper class cadets tell me about the necessity to accept their brand of Christianity, and

recall some (but not all) older religious leaders (Army officers, Chaplains) reiterate some of the same themes I recalled hearing back in Wheaton, Illinois. One view that I found very distasteful was the rigid idea that anyone who was not a Christian and who did not accept Jesus Christ as her saviour and lord was literally damned to hell. At the time, the notion that my relatives who were Jews or Muslims were damned to hell was unacceptable and unbelievable. As a cadet, I also thought hell seemed more like a cultural myth or a metaphor than a real place. My conversations with many of those people who sought to religiously recruit me as cadet left me with the impression that they held beliefs about the existence of a literal hell, and that potential exceptions for upstanding global citizens (who were not Christians) to avoid hell did not exist.

I went through a spiritual exploratory phase during my cadet years, and technically I volunteered to attend a few Bible Studies and services. I was not ordered to attend them. Although one time as a new cadet when a few of us elected not to attend religious services on a Sunday morning, our platoon leader called us “heathen”. As a new cadet (rapidly losing weight by design during basic training), I heard that different religious services offered cookies and snacks. So a close friend of mine and I decided to do some “spiritual soul searching” and attended many services during basic training. I am sure many religious leaders at West Point realized some new cadets attended their services to get cookies or food. Ultimately, I never felt like I fit in those religious groups as a cadet. I don’t think I was out-grouped for not joining them, but I’ll never know if I was treated or assessed a bit differently (perhaps people’s unconscious biases came into play and it did have an impact?). I also realize that cadets who sought to recruit me probably did so because they cared about me. They wished to save my soul and help bring me into their special in-group. The more overzealous cadets probably divulged a lack of cross-cultural competence, but the behaviour definitely suited the place, space, and culture of that time. People probably prayed for me. That seems like a nice thing. Nonetheless, this life experience taught me that religious choices are a sensitive matter, and that there is a fine line between helpful and even loving behaviours – and stepping over the line with recruitment. This experience taught me cross-cultural competence and strengthened my ability to bring people together from different backgrounds, including religiously diverse family members, colleagues, and soldiers.

### **Experiences as a Young US Army Officer**

I graduated West Point on May 29, 1993, and as a newly commissioned second lieutenant I got married a few weeks afterwards back near my hometown of Wheaton, Illinois. Shortly after that, my wife and I travelled to Fort Huachuca, Arizona, for me to attend a basic intelligence officer school before heading to my first assignment in Hawaii. We spent three years in Hawaii, and enjoyed seeing the four major islands of Oahu, the Big Island, Maui, and Kauai. Although Hawaii is part of the US, its diversity created the need for cultural learning and adaptation. The locals from Hawaii sometimes called Caucasian outsiders “Haoles”, but I think my ethnic ambiguity and slightly darker skin colour than most white people sometimes provided me a helpful, assumed local resident or insider

status. I enjoyed that presumed identity, such as when it helped us get access to special beaches. My wife worked at a local high school in our third year in Hawaii, and although she stood out as one of the very few white people at the school, faculty and students accepted her. We enjoyed learning about local culture, customs, and traditions. We loved the beaches and weather. Our extended family and friends visited us, and they enjoyed the special culture and sights of Hawaii.

Professionally, I cut my teeth in an intelligence battalion of the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division while living in Hawaii, and served as a platoon leader, deputy commanding officer, and had a short stint of four months as the acting company commander – something quite rare for young lieutenants. I enjoyed learning about the different forms of intelligence, and seeing how they coalesced to create predictions about the enemy. I also spent over a year in a Cavalry Squadron as the deputy intelligence officer. I found the Cavalry subculture, including wearing a Stetson and earning spurs (on an unusual “spur ride” ritual), endearing. The oddities of having unique uniform attire and lingo compared to the larger Infantry Division the unit supported was enjoyable. Knowing some parts of the Infantry Division disliked our Stetsons and spurs – and that many viewed us as rogues – added to our unit’s cohesion and camaraderie. In sum, my first tour in the Army taught me lessons about teamwork, followership, intelligence, leadership (I think the better leaders placed taking care of people above the Army’s sometimes irrational rules), how trusted officers received autonomy and freedom of action, and other insights.

I enjoyed this first assignment, and my attitude about serving in the Army became more positive than it was when I was at West Point. As a young officer, I experienced far more life balance. I went home after work as opposed to living in a barracks, and I enjoyed the Hawaiian beaches and other cool places on the weekends – time that belonged to me. I had the autonomy and freedom to make decisions on the job and help soldiers, received a full-time salary and benefits, and had an off-duty personal life – far more so than I had as a cadet. I was married as an officer, and cadets were not allowed to get married. Thus, a more balanced lifestyle and positive professional experiences in my tour in Hawaii improved my attitude about the Army.

### **Reflections about Company Command**

The US Army emphasizes the importance of leadership – especially command positions – at all levels of the organization and across all officer ranks. As a younger officer (a captain), I became a company commander for one year starting in the summer of 1998 at Fort Huachuca, Arizona. A week before I assumed command, my battalion commander and battalion command sergeant major (their battalion had five companies, including my future company) spent an hour telling me about the dysfunctions in my future company. Among the myriad issues which constituted their strong impression was that the company had significant tensions along both racial/ethnic and sex/gender lines. They perceived an ineffectual company command leadership team, and part of the problem entailed favouritism by the company leadership. They told me the company’s African-

American First Sergeant (1SG) seemed questionably competent, and he favoured black soldiers and sergeants. They also told me about their impressions of the Caucasian woman company commander. They told me she favoured women in the company. A few days later, I spoke to the woman commander I would soon replace. After that talk I was convinced she did not have a healthy relationship with the battalion leadership. She felt out-grouped by the battalion leaders because she was a woman. I wondered about how all these perceptions and problems impacted the company I was about to join as the company commander.

I took command a few days later. Our 150-soldier company took graduates from Army basic training and taught them different intelligence specialties. In some ways our company mimicked general basic training companies (the young soldiers lived in austere barracks, we did physical training together, and we did some common soldier training together). The core difference between basic training and our company is that the soldiers spent the bulk of their time learning about their newly assigned intelligence field (i.e., human intelligence, counter-intelligence, signals intelligence, imagery intelligence, ground surveillance, all-source intelligence, etc.). Young soldiers in our company made many mistakes as they learned how to adapt to Army life, culture, and structure (rules and regulations), and they often got into trouble. When their troubles reached a certain level, I chaired a hearing to determine whether I wanted to issue punishment. These hearings were called Article 15 proceedings, and these sessions had legal US Army backing. In my first month of hosting these Article 15 proceedings as the company commander, I noted that some drill sergeants, particularly two women, made very forceful recommendations on punishment to me (as the commander, I was the decision maker). Rather, a few drill sergeants told me I must do certain things: their tone, choice of words, and mannerisms led me to believe I was being told to follow their recommendations. I deduced this was the norm in the company, at least for some drill sergeants. So, along with other company leaders, I clarified expectations for people's roles in our company. We did some re-socializing of our company's drill sergeants. I let everyone know I valued their input, but expected them to give me authentic recommendations – not pushing or strongly expecting me to follow advice.

I also noted that our company first sergeant (1SG – the second core company leader – he was African-American) favoured a few African-American sergeants. For example, I observed that the 1SG seemed to favour a black drill sergeant compared to other drill sergeants – he reacted differently about mistakes, and placed a higher level of scrutiny (less trust) in some of the Caucasian drill sergeants. I worked with the 1SG to try to iron out these problems to create a more unified company. Nonetheless, shortly after I took command, an investigation initiated by the battalion uncovered the finding that my 1SG acted inappropriately and unprofessionally when inspecting women soldiers' rooms, which led to his removal from our company.

The new 1SG and I worked hard to create a more positive and cohesive company. We tried to change our culture and eliminate actual and perceived favouritism, out-grouping

of some troops, in-groups of other soldiers, and other divisive habits and patterns. We tried very hard to listen to all voices, incorporate other company leaders' feedback in our decisions, treat everyone fairly, and provide opportunities for all to advance. My supervisors communicated to me that the unit's cohesion and performance improved during that year. More importantly, I think that positive momentum lasted after my time as the company commander. Emotional intelligence and cross-cultural competence became key ingredients that helped bring the company together. Our command team served as a cultural bridge that brought together people from different intelligence teams, races, genders, and ages. I also learned from my supervisors who gave me space and useful advice. This experience further motivated me to serve in the US Army.

### **Becoming a Sociologist: Gaining Enriched and Deepened Worldviews**

When I was a captain with about six years of Army experience (during my company command), the Department of Behavioural Sciences and Leadership (BS&L) at West Point offered me the chance to study sociology (to pursue a master's degree) and return to serve on the faculty for three years. I recalled that as a West Point cadet I did not like many parts of the Academy, but I deeply enjoyed my experiences in my major in BS&L – my professors were caring, competent, and accessible, and their roles appealed to me. I perceived the culture of BS&L as more relaxed and less militant as compared to other parts of USMA, and I also found the academic and professional material intellectually stimulating. I also stayed in touch with a few BS&L professors and mentors after I graduated from West Point, and some of them encouraged me to apply to come back and serve on the faculty. One mentor was retired brigadier general Barney Forsythe, PhD, who inspired me as a professor with his conversation-oriented seminar course about leadership when I was a senior cadet, who returned my letters for many years after graduation, and who endorsed my application to serve on the West Point faculty. I also enjoyed serving as an Army officer, which was an important factor. Thus, I accepted BS&L's offer to attend graduate school and serve as junior military faculty.

During my first stint (to earn a master's degree) at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, I had inspiring and impactful sociology professors who studied the military (Charlie Moskos) and culture (Wendy Griswold). I deeply enjoyed my studies, and later in my career I returned to Northwestern to complete my PhD (Griswold chaired my dissertation – Moskos passed away prior to my return to Northwestern University). Academically, I am a sociologist who concentrates on the military and culture. Cross-cultural competence, especially as it pertains to the military, has figured prominently in my scholarly work.

When I first attended graduate school I made new friends, and it seemed that all of them held very liberal views – which enriched my growth and cross-cultural competence. After my upbringing in the conservative community of Wheaton, Illinois, experiences as a cadet at West Point, and my time as a young officer getting socialized by Army officers and career soldiers, I had experienced many strong conservative influences. My small,

tight-knit, and highly liberal Northwestern PhD cohort generally accepted me, and my new peers' and friends' influences (along with the culture of my sociology department) helped provide me with more balance in worldviews. For example, I embarrassingly learned that although I viewed myself as open-minded towards sexual minorities, the word gay (with a negative connotation) was part of my vocabulary as a young adult. In a conversation with a few graduate students, including one of my closest friends from graduate school (who was bisexual), I used the word gay to refer to a character from a movie that I very much disliked. A different graduate student brought the inappropriateness and potentially insulting nature of this mistake to my attention. I immediately felt awful, and even recounting this story today makes me cringe. I apologized to my friend, and she wholly accepted my apology and did not treat me differently. Interestingly, that same close friend told me she originally thought I was put in our graduate cohort as a government spy! I found that shocking and quite funny, but I learned about why she originally held that view and appreciated her candour. We learned a lot from each other, and our friendship deepened our worldviews and ability to build relationships with different people. Graduate school enhanced my ability to perceive and take different perspectives, argue from different viewpoints, brought an expanded open-mindedness to my life, and created other attitudinal and behavioural evolutions that bolstered my cross-cultural competence. The experience made me a better cultural bridge.

### **Serving in an Army Culture Centre**

As a mid-career officer (a major with about 14 years of Army service), I took a career risk by electing to serve in an Army culture centre. At that time, the mainstream Army career path dictated that I should have sought to serve as the deputy commander or chief of operations for an Army battalion (ideally one year in each role). But my interest in culture, education, and the novelty of the new culture centre caused me to veer off the traditional career path. I quickly learned that getting along well with diverse people, listening and learning from them, and drawing on cross-cultural leadership skills became essential to my role as the director of the culture centre. The centre had about 40 members who varied by generation, religion, ethnicity, race, educational background, military experience (some with no military experience, some were prior soldiers), sex, and other factors. When I entered the centre, internal conflict was rampant for a few reasons. One was the lack of an officer physically located at the centre as its leader. When I arrived in January 2007, every member was a civilian contractor. Second was the fact that three different contractor companies employed the centre's members. This created competitive – rather than collegial – conditions in the centre. Cultivating greater teamwork and trust was key, and cross-cultural competence not only became the core concept that the culture centre tried to educate and cultivate in Army soldiers – but was also a vital competency members of the organization needed to put into practice daily to get along and succeed in the mission.

I learned a great deal from the professional experience of colleagues and made lifelong friends not only with people in the centre, but also with people in similar culture



and language centres across the US Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps. These colleagues and friends helped me learn new attitudes and behaviours, which enabled me to better serve as a cultural bridge that connected unique people. They also served as academic mentors who helped deepen my understanding of military cross-cultural competence. I think the centre made some progress during my 15 months, but I also know that the potential for internal strife remained an ongoing tension for the organization past my tenure. I served in that same culture centre again during the summer of 2016 as a visiting professor, and enjoyed rejuvenating old friendships. I also noted some interpersonal fissures in 2016, which reminded me of what I experienced in the centre in 2007-2008. Effective cross-cultural leadership was a key ingredient that helped the culture centre to succeed – and is a vital ingredient for other contemporary diverse organizations.

### **Combat Deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq**

I have deployed twice to combat zones during my Army career. I served in Afghanistan in 2008, and I also deployed to Iraq in 2009-2010. Each deployment lasted six months. Both experiences helped me to cultivate cross-cultural competence and many other leader, follower, and other skills. In Afghanistan, I served as the deputy of a targeting intelligence unit in an international headquarters in Kabul. Our team's top function was to assess intelligence files intended to put enemy combatant leaders and key enablers on a special targeting list, and make recommendations to many general officers, including the top commanding general. My unit was culturally diverse including officers and senior sergeants from different branches of the military from the United Kingdom, Canada, France, Germany, and the US. During our weekly targeting cycle, our unit also worked with lawyers, political advisors, and several senior officers. Working on a diverse team as part of a larger joint intelligence staff with soldiers from dozens of different countries required extra time and effort to learn about different cultures, approaches to the mission, communication styles, norms, and myriad other factors to succeed. I enjoyed the cross-cultural experiences on this staff, albeit at times tensions ensued.

One memory about my experience in Afghanistan constituted a mistake I made. I had too long of an overlap of about five weeks with the US Army officer I eventually replaced as the team deputy, who was a lieutenant colonel (LTC). One or two weeks of overlap would have sufficed. I was a major at the time, and I found the LTC's persistent bragging – including how physically tough he was as a fighter, his career success, his high intelligence, and so on – I found this immature, distasteful, and difficult to stomach. I lost some respect for him. One night during a very busy phase of our team's mission, I found this LTC's corrections on my targeting intelligence packets to be excessively fussy. I had experienced this kind of feedback for a few weeks and remained quiet. But this time, instead of biting my lip and making the corrections, I lashed out for a few seconds and revealed my frustration with this nitpickiness. The team heard my eruption, and I felt embarrassed about it afterwards. Later that night, I apologized to the LTC, and spoke to the team's chief about the incident (who did not seem concerned about it). Shortly after that incident, that LTC left Afghanistan and went back to his normal post. I was ready to

assume the deputy duties. But I learned that part of cross-cultural competence means grounding oneself in deep self-awareness and emotional regulation, especially during the challenges of working long hours while being deployed in a stressful combat zone. I also learned that owning mistakes and apologizing – especially as an officer who is expected to confront and resolve interpersonal strife (and who will inevitably err on occasion) – is a sign of strength and a necessary part of maintaining positive relationships and team cohesion.

One member of our intelligence team, Andreas, was a German infantry master sergeant. He learned about our targeting mission and became very competent in profile and network analysis, and in other parts of our mission. However, he set very high standards for himself and people around him, and his interpersonal approach was sometimes divisive. Several people on our team, including an Asian-Canadian woman officer from the Canadian Navy and our Royal Air Force (UK) team chief, considered Andreas too rigid, judgmental, and at times disrespectful. I took extra time to build trust with Andreas, and tried to mentor him to improve his diplomatic and social skills to better his relationships on our small international team. When Andreas took his mid-tour leave for a few weeks, he went back to Germany for his wedding. This was his third marriage, and he was 40 years old. My experiences with Andreas caused me to reflect about the relationship between emotional intelligence (self-regulation and social effectiveness in one's own culture, or intracultural competence) and cross-cultural competence (successfully interacting across two or more cultures). His string of marriages in his own German culture caused me to reflect about Andreas and whether he possessed some low dimensions of emotional intelligence (i.e., excessive rigidity, not adapting well to social cues and settings), and whether this related to his struggles on our diverse, multinational team. He was a very competent team member in networking and targeting intelligence, but we learned it was often best to let Andreas work by himself. Understanding Andreas helped me better serve as the team deputy. Indeed, learning about all our teammates' personalities, tendencies, abilities, and blind spots (which we all had) helped me to best set up our team for success during my deployment to Afghanistan.

I served in Iraq from the fall of 2009 to the spring of 2010, and spent most of my time in Baghdad, although I travelled to other locations during this combat tour. My role was to serve as the deputy of an American military advising team, and also to serve as a military advisor to Iraqi colonels and generals. We taught our Iraqi counterparts how to better conduct intelligence operations. One major event during this tour included providing a new compound for our Iraqi partners. This new base enabled them to move various intelligence agencies, which were formerly spread out throughout Baghdad, into one location. We taught them about the potential power of teamwork across their intelligence agencies, and how together they could create the best possible enemy predictions. My interactions with our Iraqi counterparts required cross-cultural competence and patience. I observed some US officers who flexibly succeeded as advisors, while others struggled in this consultant role (advisors only gave advice).

In this deployment, I also re-learned the critical importance of building rapport with diverse US teammates, and being fair with all groups as a leader. I found leading the Arab-American linguists on our team especially challenging at times. Our linguists were American citizens who spent their early lives in Iraq, Morocco, Egypt, Lebanon, and a few other Middle-Eastern countries, and then immigrated to the US and became citizens. The linguists often did not get along well, and part of that stemmed from dysfunctional competition. Ameliorating these tensions, and also figuring out which linguists best paired with the different US military advisors for specific missions, required consistent patience, attention, and cross-cultural leadership. I think my Arabic last name and that part of my cultural background helped me to build rapport with both US linguists and our Iraqi officer counterparts. The linguists laughed about my answer to their question about whether I spoke Arabic. I said that my loving father had a hot temper, so I am fluent in cursing in Arabic ! It turns out that is true.

During my deployment, I conducted a research project that helped my advising unit to conduct a self-assessment. I created and distributed a survey (carrying questions such as “What helps US advisors to succeed?”; “Why do some US advisors fail?”; “What are the key qualities of successful advisors?”; and a few others), collected and analyzed the data, then collated the results into a report for our unit. I think the report particularly benefitted new advisors who joined it. One especially poignant moment from Iraq was when I back-briefed my bosses about the study’s results. One result talked about taking a cautious approach when assigning US women officers to serve as advisors to Iraqis, which basically suggested that we should ask an Iraqi counterpart if he would be open to having a US woman advisor (i.e., some more traditional Muslims might view frequent meetings with a woman to be problematic). My senior supervisor, who led our entire advising unit, balked at that finding and said with vigour, “if the Iraqis don’t want to work with our women advisors, screw them!” Behind closed doors and away from that senior supervisor, my direct supervisor who led our advising subgroup said we cannot force US gender norms on Iraqis – and that doing so could hurt US-Iraqi relationship building. I enjoyed hearing these contrasting views, which enriched my research project. My study became the genesis for my doctoral dissertation project, which helped me when I returned to graduate school in 2010. Thus, the structures, cultures, and experiences of my combat deployments deepened my cross-cultural competence, including learning more nuances of how to bring diverse people together to accomplish a mission. This helped me to grow as a cultural bridge.

### **More Reflections about the Importance of Cross-Cultural Competence in my Life**

During my life I’ve worked conscientiously to build trust and enduring relationships with family, friends, colleagues, community neighbours, and other people. The closest people in my life have different religions, races, ethnicities, social classes, political views, ages, genders, and other distinctions. My core family and friends include Jews, Arabs (Muslims), Christians, and people who have no religion. Further, I have met members of the US military that distrust sociology and academics, and some sociologists and academics who distrust soldiers. Cross-cultural competence has helped me personally and

professionally to find common ground with disparate – even conflicting – cultures, and serve as a cultural bridge that unites people.

For example, I have healthy relationships with my Muslim half-sisters, who know that my Arabic father (who passed away in 1998) wanted me to become Muslim. One cultural tradition suggests that if a child's father is Muslim, that makes the child Muslim. My sisters appreciate the respect I show for their faith, and they do not try to proselytize me. When I was younger, my stepmom and her brothers tried to recruit me. One poignant memory was when one of my stepmom's brothers tried to proselytize me during my father's funeral services. Although I found his attempts distasteful, I also recognized he wished to fulfil my father's wishes and perform a religious duty. Presently, my Muslim sisters, stepmom, and I have loving, respectful relationships, and they have wisely not tried to proselytize me for a long time.

Another cultural tradition is that if a child's mother is Jewish, that makes the child Jewish. My mom is Jewish but does not practise Judaism. I have attended some Jewish religious ceremonies in my life, such as some Passover Seders over the years – mostly as a child, and a few as an adult. I do not practise Judaism, but consider myself Jewish culturally. As I reflect on my lifetime interactions with actively religious people who identify as Christians, Muslims, and Jews, I conclude the most subtle and non-intrusive attempts to recruit me have been from practising Jews. I enjoy discussions about what being Jewish means. Most recently, I debated what it means to be Jewish with a Jewish colleague at West Point who argues that for someone to be Jewish, she must practise Judaism. I hold a different view : I think a person can be culturally Jewish without practising the faith. In sum, I have good relationships with my Jewish family, friends, and colleagues, some of whom practise Judaism and others, like me, who do not.

### **A Diversity of Political Opinions in My Family and Closest Friends**

I have cultivated strong friendships with people who hold religious, political, and other beliefs that differ from my own. My inner circle of family and friends includes people who hold many political views (conservative or Republican; liberal or Democrat; Centrist; Independent; and other perspectives). As one example, I'm close friends with a senior Army officer who is Christian and conservative, although I think his religious identity is more important to him than political views. I think his religious beliefs influence him to hold conservative political orientations. I personally do not identify as liberal or conservative, and usually prefer avoiding political conversations. On the whole, I have more liberal views than conservative ones. In conversations with that dear friend of two decades, we tend to bypass discussions of religion or politics, or we tread carefully if those subjects emerge. We find common ground elsewhere.

On a few occasions I have been curious where my friend stood on a political subject, and I found a way to ask. During the run-up to the November 2016 presidential election, I asked him a neutral question. I asked if he had any thoughts about the election. He said the number one issue for him was that he wanted a Republican as President

because he anticipated the selection of new Supreme Court justices in the next few years. I surmised from knowing him for a long time that his conservative positions on abortion and sexual minorities' rights probably shaped this thought. I think this opinion is a common one among many Evangelical and other American citizens who share similar, strongly held religious beliefs. Another brief political chat ensued with the same friend in August 2018. While conversing about life with cigars and single-malt scotches in hand, I asked him about his views of the current administration – namely Donald Trump. He said he felt good about Trump's performance based on America's stronger international presence, and he liked the Supreme Court Justice selections with conservative leanings. He never asked me how I felt about the US political situation, perhaps because he knew we generally hold different opinions. Or perhaps he (more wisely than me) wished to bypass the subject. I guess our personality types, unlike others, do not seek out debates as a point of bonding. Despite our different political views, I cherish our friendship, and these occasional political discussions help me keep a "pulse" on what my friend thinks and feels – which likely mirrors the thoughts of a large part of America and the world.

For sake of the future of the US, I hope that American citizens can remain friends with people who hold different political views. Recent experiences with some members of my extended family give me pause regarding the seemingly growing political tribal divide that could threaten America's and many countries' futures. Thus, a Twenty-First Century challenge will require US and global citizens to cultivate greater open-mindedness and cross-cultural competence to ameliorate the growing political fissures that threaten the future of our still young nation. Many places around the world face a very similar challenge. I feel fortunate to have family, friends, and loved ones in my life who hold different political views, religions, cultural differences, and other identities and values than me. Their acceptance of me – including my political points of divergence and personal weaknesses – further teaches me about toleration and compassion, and helps me to cultivate cross-cultural competence and serve as a cultural bridge that brings unique people together.

### **The Applicability of Cross-Cultural Competence as an Academy Professor at West Point**

Cross-cultural competence has helped me serve as an academy professor at West Point in my current assignment. Cross-cultural competence has helped me to direct the sociology programme since 2014 – we are likely the most diverse academic major at the Academy. Our programme has a shortage of West Point's numerical majority: white male cadets. I enjoy interacting with our faculty and cadets in many different forums, including our classes, luncheon discussions of timely topics, trips to academic conferences, and socials and informal get-togethers. I think our programme empowers cadets to discuss, vent, and deconstruct many topics. Importantly, it has become a safe space for minority cadets, which benefits the Academy. However, as I reflect about some of our programme's goals, including building cross-cultural competence and open-mindedness, I ponder whether dominant group cadets (i.e. white heterosexual men from higher class backgrounds

who hold conservative views) feel comfortable in our conversations. Thus, an ongoing challenge in our programme entails cultivating perspective-taking, a thirst to learn about and bond with different people, and an open-mindedness towards all. But I also realize our programme exists at an elite, historically conservative Academy, where despite progress in the realm of diversity and inclusion, minority people still perceive hostility or feel unwelcome in some places. Thus, I recognize its great value to the Academy by providing minority cadets a safe space to thrive (or survive), especially given the ongoing increase of minority cadets.

For most of my time at the Academy across two assignments on the faculty, I have served as a member of the Dean's Diversity Committee of the Faculty Council. From August of 2014 to December of 2019, I chaired that committee. The committee's primary function is to help the Dean's Directorate (West Point's academic programme) to establish and achieve diversity and inclusion goals, and it also assists the Academy's Diversity and Inclusion Office and other related initiatives. The faculty on the Diversity Committee reflect on how the Academy's structure and culture actively benefit diversity and inclusion initiatives, and also on how they sometimes stymie progress. One project we embarked upon a few years ago entailed working with our Dean to create and publish a diversity and inclusion strategy for the Directorate. The strategy communicates diversity and inclusion goals linked to supporting three overarching areas: cadets, faculty, and organizational culture. The Diversity Committee helps the Directorate to achieve its strategy partly by connecting people from different agencies across the Academy; we serve as a cultural bridge that brings diverse people together onto common ground.

My academic identity reflects my academic ancestry and interest in studying military and cultural sociology, and cross-cultural leadership. Two historical scholarly figures in the study of the military held differing views about the extent to which the US military should expand its missions and diversity. The political scientist, Samuel Huntington (1981), argued for a tight-knit and insular military, in which managers of violence (military leaders) should focus on a limited set of missions linked to traditional warfare. The military sociologist, Morris Janowitz (1960), argued that over time the US armed forces would diversify in both its types of missions and the people that served. My academic ancestry stems back to Janowitz through some of his former students and mentees, including esteemed military sociologists Charles Moskos, David Segal, and Mady Segal. Although I was never a student of the Segals, one of their now well-established students, a sociology professor at West Point, Morten Ender, has been an influential professional and academic figure in my life, as well as a friend. I miss the renowned military sociologist Charlie Moskos; he was incredibly humble, gregarious, and accessible as a professor, my master's thesis advisor and chair, and mentor when I first attended graduate school from 2000-2002. Wendy Griswold, a prominent cultural sociologist, has also shaped my academic identity, and her accessibility, openness, practicality, and intellectual stimulation as my dissertation chair from 2010-2013 also enriched my growth. All those scholars provided me support, counsel, useful insights, and helped me grow.

Thus, my academic mentors have inspired me to grow as a scholar and to become a cultural bridge in life. My academic work focuses on military sociology, cultural sociology, education, cross-cultural and inclusive leadership, and the experiences of deployed soldiers, and these interests reflect my academic lineage.

My status as a soldier may seem like an inherent contradiction with my niche as a cultural bridge who seeks to bring people together, mainly for the purpose of peace. Indeed, when I completed my PhD at Northwestern University in 2013, the sociology department awarded me the Karpf Peace Prize because the selection committee determined my dissertation held the potential to create more peace in the world. One of my dissertation committee members, Al Hunter (another terrific mentor), told me he initially thought it was odd to have an Army officer win the department's peace prize for graduate student work, but he voted for me because my research held the promise to promote peace. I hope my work reduces stereotypes held by some people that soldiers and officers thirst for war. While it is true that some people in security forces tend to favour aggressive, action-oriented policies and philosophies – sometimes at inappropriate times with tragic consequences – I think most members of US security organizations serve to reduce violence, and prefer using more peaceful, diplomatic measures. My impression of the US Army after 27 years of service has taught me that the Army ultimately seeks to create conditions of peace and stability. Few soldiers I have served with “pray for war” or zealously seek combat.

## **Conclusion**

This auto-ethnography told the story of how a culturally diverse young boy from a working-class family paved a path towards the American Dream (i.e., upper middle-class) through attending the US Military Academy at West Point, serving as an Army officer for a career, and becoming a professor. This reflection uses cross-cultural competence and upward mobility as major themes that tie the narratives together. I seek to serve as a cultural bridge that tries to unite diverse people in my life. I will constantly need to learn and adapt to continue being a cultural bridge, including having good relationships with my Generation Z children and cadets. I will continue to misstep along the journey, and I hope I will have the humility and fortitude to recover and expand my cross-cultural competence. This auto-ethnography reinforces the fact that the military institution helps many young people – including minorities – to achieve upward mobility and greater societal acceptance. I am grateful for the privileged path I have had in the Army, which started as a new cadet at West Point and will end as a colonel and academy professor. Immersed in the cultures and structures that influenced me throughout my lifetime include my parents, family, friends, coaches, professors, soldiers, and others who encouraged, tolerated, taught, and nurtured me. They fuel my motivation to educate and mentor young people as they forge their life paths and dreams.

This auto-ethnography also indirectly discusses an important lesson about how I learned to sometimes go against the grain – or practise agency – to follow my passions and create an authentic path. My father from Syria went against his father's wishes for him

to become a doctor, and instead he became a locomotive engineer. My Jewish mother and Arabic (Muslim) father chose to marry in the US in the 1960s, letting their young love trump structural and cultural factors of the time that communicated the message they should not marry – factors that still communicate a similar message in many places around the world today. I became an Army officer, but chose to veer off the mainstream career path to serve as an officer and professor. Serving in a culture centre constituted a career risk, but one that ultimately paid professional and personal dividends given the new friendships and networks that taught me about cross-cultural competence and how to inclusively lead a sophisticated, diverse group of people. My experiences in that culture centre, as a sociology graduate student, as a sociologist, and as an officer have taught me the meaning of cross-cultural competence, which empowered me to conduct this project about my past and how it connects to the world.<sup>12</sup>

Parts of this auto-ethnography intend to communicate ideas for the sake of the health of America and the world. This piece communicates the hope that people worldwide will cultivate sufficient cross-cultural competence to retain relationships and trust with people who have different religions, races, ethnicities, genders, ages and generations, political and ideological beliefs, class backgrounds, and other differences. Building more cross-cultural competence will help the nation to survive. Externally, America has the opportunity to use its global influence to usher in more diplomacy, cooperation, and peace with our international cohabitants of Earth – a fragile planet with finite resources. When I explain to my daughters (now fast approaching their college years) and also to West Point cadets that I place my faith in them to bring the US and the world closer together, to right some of the dysfunctions, I sincerely mean those words. I deeply invest in them and their development, and I hold the highest hopes that they will become cross-culturally competent leaders of character for our nation and globally engaged citizens. My eldest daughter intends to begin her career as an Army officer, and will become an ROTC cadet and a university freshman this fall. My younger daughter, who will complete her junior year of high school this year, wishes to work as a speech therapist or a forensic scientist – two fields where she can contribute and help people. Both enjoy their culturally unique families, partake in myriad extracurricular events, and are maturing into engaged young adults. I hope they will help bring different people together in their lifetimes.

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<sup>12</sup> Ciftci & Gurbuz, 2019.



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