The Next Evolution in Mission Critical Team Assessment

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Abstract

The current Assessment and Selection processes of many Mission Critical Teams continue to experience internal friction between the quantitative assessors (Scholars) and qualitative assessors (Cadre). Some of this tension is due to the perception of unequal distribution of influence and decision-making authority. It is further complicated by the false assumption that both groups are operating under the same Trait Based Assessment models and methodologies. When, in fact, while Scholars continue to use quantitative methodologies to assess *Traits*, the Cadre have begun to formalize the qualitative methodologies to assess *Attributes*. These two methodologies (traits and attributes respectively), which originated from the same body of research, have since diverged in both science and intent. This paper will describe the history, co-evolution, and divergence of the two models and propose methods to move from dissonance, to congruence, and finally to synergy. If the Cadre is able to better define, and organize, the assessment terms they are currently using into a language which can be shared with others, they will both increase their ability to assert their cultural authority and more effectively contribute to a more comprehensive assessment process.

Origin of Assessment Centers

The current research model underlying most Assessment and Selection Processes can be traced back to 1927 when German Psychologist, Max Simoneit, was tasked with improving the Wehrmacht's ability to select military officers under the tight restrictions agreed to under the Treaty of Versailles (Cline, 2017; Knox, June, 1919). As a noted academic, Simoneit published his "Whole Man" approach in the lead up to the war (Max Simoneit, 1933; Max Simoneit, 1937). This approach was predicated on the idea that one needed to assess whole person (Banks,

1995, pp. 34-35) through the observation of action, and not just the quantitative component parts (e.g, intelligence, physical fitness, etc.) which emerged from specific testing. Twelve years later, in 1939, WR Bion (A British Psychoanalyst) was tasked by the British Military to create a new War Officer Selection Board (W.O.S.B.'s). He used Simoneit's research to design the new qualitative assessment methodologies (Bion, 2019). Then four years later, in 1943, the American Psychologist, Henry Murray, was tasked by the newly formed Office of Strategic Services (OSS) (Services, 1948, p. 3) to create a selection program for future American spies and saboteurs (Highhouse & Kostek, 2013, p. 566). The OSS design (later documented in the book "Assessment of Men") was a developed using a combination of recorded observations of the British W.O.S.B. process, Simoneit's research, and Murray's emerging research in the area of Trait Theory (Lenzenweger, 2014; Murray, 1938; OSS, 1948).

The original language used by those academics; Trait, Attribute and Competency, have continued to shape the culture and methodologies of future teams and, as such, needs to be clarified. A Trait is a term used to describe a consistent pattern of behavior, thought, and emotion (a trait) which can be measured and reliably compared to others (John & Srivastava, 1999; Pervin, 1994; Salas, Sims, & Burke, 2005). Once believed to be stable over one's lifetime, research now indicates that personality traits can change in the face of major life event, such as combat, injury, divorce, etc. (Bleidorn, Hopwood, & Lucas, 2018). The Five most common traits, listed at the top of Table 1, are grouped within the Five Factor Model (FFM) used in many "personality inventories," such as the Revised NEO Personality inventory (NEO PI–R) (Costa & McCrae, 2008), widely used in personnel selection (Detrick & Chibnall, 2013).

Table 1- Five Factor Model

Neuroticism	Extraversion	Openness	Agreeableness	Conscientiousness
Anxiety	Warmth	Fantasy	Trust	Competence
Angry Hostility	Gregariousness	Aesthetics	Straight-forwardness	Order
Depression	Assertiveness	Feelings	Altruism	Dutifulness
Self-consciousness	Activity	Actions	Compliance	Achievement Striving
Impulsiveness	Excitement-seeking	Ideas	Modesty	Self-discipline
Vulnerability	Positive Emotions	Values	Tender-mindedness	Deliberation

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While the above Traits speak to specific quantitative aspects of a candidate's personality, Attributes refer to the qualitative characteristics, that are not as easily measured, such as mental agility, singing ability, sense of humor, attitude, etc. Lastly, the term competency is used to reference measurable tests of skills, such as shooting precision, driving agility, and running. What is important to note, is that while the Assessment research of WW2 had a profound and lasting influence on later research (Heinz L Ansbacher, 1941; Heinz Ludwig Ansbacher, 1941; Burt, 1942; Fitts, 1946; OSS, 1948), the tools and methodologies used to assess candidates continue to evolve in separate and distinct ways.

Emergence of the Corporate Assessment Center

Shortly after the OSS Psychologists published "The Assessment of Men" (OSS, 1948) corporations such as the American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T) began adapting those assessment and selection methodologies to more accurately predict: which candidates to select for employment, which employees to promote, ways to diagnose employee performance, and where to improve employees ongoing professional development (Earles & Winn, 1977, p. 3; Guidelines, 2015). These new "Assessment Centers," would continue the research of earlier psychologists leveraging insights from the growing field of Industrial and Organizational Psychology. These Psychologists would continue to standardize ways to measure and record a candidates behavior during behavioral simulation exercises (such as group interviews or leaderless group tests) (Guidelines, 2015).

At the same time these new Assessment Centers were starting to leverage trait theory to select future business people, researchers were beginning to question the overall efficacy of the qualitatively based "Whole Man" Assessment Center methodologies, specifically calling into question whether qualitative assessment methodologies were actually superior to the quantitative ones (Highhouse & Kostek, 2013; Meehl, 1954). This debate was heavily influenced by an article by Ann Howard, in 1974, called "The Assessment of Assessment Centers" (Howard, 1974). Howard argued both that there was no evidence to suggest that the German, British, or American Assessment Models used in WW2 actually accomplished what they set out to do, and that many of the "Whole Man" qualitative methodologies aimed at predicting candidate potential

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or performance did not work (Howard, 1974, p. 115). By 2013, there remained very little research on the effectiveness of the "Whole Man" approach to candidate selection, and what research did exist had very mixed results (Highhouse & Kostek, 2013). This trend in research has encouraged Organizational Psychologists to slowly transition back toward more quantitative methodologies as illustrated by the emergence of "people analytics" field and their focus on big data and data analytics (Bock, 2015; Massey, 2019).

Emergence of the Mission Critical Team Assessment Program

During the same period in which Assessment Centers were appearing in the corporate environment a new type of "Assessment Program" being developed in response to the emergence of Mission Critical Teams. In 1952, four years after the publication of "Assessment of Men" and seven years after the disbanding of the OSS in 1945, the U.S. formed their first permanent Special Operations team, the U.S. Army Special Forces, or "Green Beret's" (Bank, 1986). Many of the Cadre who designed and ran the first SF assessment and selection programs were former combat members of the OSS (Bank, 1986; Banks, 2006, p. 4). Unlike the OSS, however, where the OSS Psychologists running assessment "had little or no first- hand knowledge of the jobs the selectees would be performing" (Handler, 2001, p. 563) the Cadre who designed and implemented the SF Assessment Program knew that they might someday be in combat alongside the candidates. The result was that Cadre tended to be far more interested in the candidate's attributes and competencies, than their measurable traits. While Psychologists remained involved in the new Assessment Programs they primarily served as subject matter experts (SME) to support and enable the program rather than design and run it. As the original Cadre began to be replaced by the next generation of Cadre, who had actually passed through the selection and training pipeline, the values of the Cadre began to evolve. Instead of just selecting individuals with which they had trust and confidence, they now also felt the deep responsibility to uphold the inherited standards and historical legacy of their team.

The divergence of Assessment Centers and Assessment Programs

As time passed, the emerging Assessment Centers and Assessment Programs began facing different demands and pressures. As Assessment Scholars began adapting historical Assessment Methodologies to corporate America they focused on making the process more rigorous and

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testable which, in some ways, increased the predictive validity of their findings (Klimoski & Brickner, 1987). One of the major changes within the new Assessment Center methodologies resulted from the need to vastly reduce the duration and intensity of the physical adversity faced by selection candidates. As Organizational Psychologists were focused on assessing candidates who would be successful at a specific role within a hierarchical corporation, they no longer required candidates to experience shared adversity and deprivation to build team cohesion or measure resilience. These changes meant that "Crucible" (L. Smith, 2007) or "Rites of Passage" (Turner, 1995; Van Gennep, 2011) experiences, which marked entry into the "Communitas" (Turner, 1995), were removed. Communitas refers to a group of people who have all passed though the liminality of a shared Crucible or Rite of Passage experience (e.g. "Hell Week" for the Navy SEAL's) and ultimately succeed in becoming "Badged" (e.g. authorized to wear the team insignia such as a Navy SEAL trident, Ranger Tab, Green Beret, etc.). The term "liminality" is a Latin term that means "threshold" and describes the place "betwixt and between" equilibrium and chaos (Turner, 1995, p. 107). In this context, liminality is an Anthropological reference describing the experience of a selection candidate who lets go of who they once were without yet being the person they hope to become (Van Gennep, 2011) which is core to the shared experience of the Communitas. This meant that while Assessment Scholars were increasing their predictive capacity through the measurement of traits, they were also diminishing the role of assessment in building the cultural capacity of the team. At the same time, the Cadre running Assessment Programs were often focused more on evaluating attributes, such as trust, courage, resilience, sense of humor, etc., in order to better target which candidates may be a potential mismatch in values, or a potential cultural contributor (Cline, 2017). The problem is that without knowing it, Scholars and Cadre had each begun speaking a different language, which scientists refer to as the emic and the etic. Emic is a term that refers to the language that emerges from the Communitas. Etic is the language used by Academia to describe their observations from outside the communitas (Schwandt, 2007, p. 81).

One of the major differences in the Etic and the Emic is how they become articulated. While the Cadre can use their experience to identify the strengths and failings of a candidate, they will often lack the ability to articulate the nature of those observations with the same level of
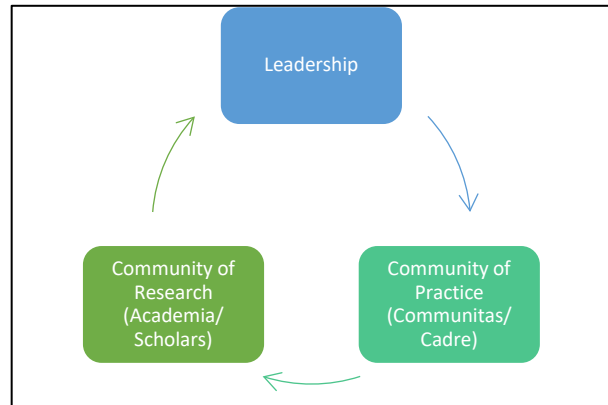
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precision of that of a psychologist explaining statistical variance. Having the understanding of what "right" looks and feels like is not the same as possessing the means to communicate that understanding. This phenomenon, referred to as the Tacit Knowledge Transfer Problem (Cline, 2017) describes the challenge experts face when trying to articulate their expertise (Polanyi, 1968, p. 30). It turns out that trying to articulate, or verbally explain, to someone how to ride a bike or learn to swim is incredibly difficult because sensations like balance and coordination are not easily articulated. When you further consider that many of the lived experiences shared by the Communitas (e.g.; combat, surgery, firefighting, etc.) defy description and explanation, it leads to a culture that is just not in the habit of explaining why something works, since everyone around them shares that understanding.

This research has helped to clarify that the transition from a Psychologist run Assessment Center to a Cadre run Assessment Program brought with it several unintended consequences. The first is that the original assessment models were built by, and for, psychologists who are trained in assessment methodology and rigorous in its application (Spychalski, Quiñones, Gaugler, & Pohley, 1997). When Cadre took over the management of Assessment Programs, they were often unaware of the specific research, or methodologies, behind many of the selection evolutions they were inheriting. This lack of understanding meant they often remain unable to maximize the potential predictive validity of those evolutions. It is, for example, the difference between being counseled by a trained psychologist and talking to a friend. It may feel the same, but it is not. While the Cadre might feel justified that their focus on culture, and their experienced assessment of attributes, is more important than a sterile accounting of traits, they risk being misled by their own cognitive biases. In order to actually accomplish what they really want, Cadre need a mechanism to objectively assess and validate their lived experience or they risk believing strongly in something that no longer works, or worse, is counterproductive (De Neys & Goel, 2011; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006; Rousseau & McCarthy, 2007). This divergence in values, language, and methodologies between Scholars and the Communitas has often led to an adversarial relationship when in fact, if reframed, could evolve to be both synergistic and generative.

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Mission Critical Team Selection Boards

Mission Critical Team Assessment Programs are often punctuated by several Selection Boards. These are formal committees, made up of the Leadership, Academia, and Communitas (Figure 1). All of these members belong within the Assessment Program Community, by which we mean any secular group that shares the same language, norms, traditions and rules. The Leadership is made up of the badged (or in some cases unbadged) individuals who are responsible for the evolving mission of the team and make the final decision on whether a candidate is selected or dismissed. Academia (Scholars or SME's) refers to the unbadged professionals in the Assessment Program who are tasked with upholding the rigor in the programs underlying science, processes, and procedures, to ensure

Figure 1- MCT Assessment Community

consistency, accuracy and fairness. The Communitas (Cadre), refers to the badged professionals who represent the evolving tactics, and cultural and historical standards which define the legacy of team. It should be noted that as the evolution of science is simply slower than the evolution of tactics, the innovation cycles between scholars and cadre will always move at different speeds.

A common challenge within this community is how the authority that underlies these three separate voices are heard and validated.

Authorities:

- Leadership: Structural and embedded as everyone else works for them.
- Academia: Past science and cumulative research.
- Cadre: The moral, cultural and historical legacy of the Communitas.

Given the difficulty in articulating the nuances of culture (The Emic), Cadre are often at a disadvantage in articulating and executing their authority. One way to overcome this imbalance in authority is to recognize the separate, but distinct roles, played by Academia and the Communitas as seen in the below chart.

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	ACADEMIA (SCHOLARS)	COMMUNITAS (CADRE)
FOUNDATION	Secular	Sacred
RESPONSIBILITY	Science, Policy and Procedure	Culture, Language and History
ENVIRONMENT	Stability	Emergence & Liminality
STRUCTURE	Community of Research	Community of Practice
FOCUS	Rigor & Predictive Capacity	Trust & Legacy
KNOWLEDGE BASE	Explicit, Testable, Academic	Implicit, Tacit and Experienced
LANGUAGE	Etic	Emic
DRIVER OF CHANGE	Change in Science	Change in Mission or Environment
PHILOSOPHY	A Priori: Knowledge independent of experience	A Posteriori: Knowledge based on experience
PRIMARY STRENGTH	Selecting Bad Candidates Out	Selecting Good Candidates In
METHADOLOGY	Quantitative	Qualitative

The intent of the above chart is to highlight the fact that both Academia and the Communitas have legitimate voices and each play a critical role within an MCT Assessment program. In order to effectively arbitrate these voices, all parties (including the Cadre themselves), must recognize that they have evolved into a legitimate "Community of Practice" (Wenger, 2000). In the same structure of a "tribe around a cave fire, to a medieval guild, to a group of nurses in a ward, to a street gang, to a community of engineers interested in brake design" (Wenger, 2000, p. 229) the Cadre represent a close knit culture with its own distinct language and expertise (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 4). These Communities of Practice evolve so that "competence is historically and socially defined" (Wenger, 2000, p. 226) and where status is most often "conferred by expertise and not rank" (Jacobs & Sanders, 2005, p. 13). Furthermore, the Cadre within MCT Assessment Programs have evolved to inhabit the role of community elders (McIntosh, 2009) who hold unique "Funds of Knowledge" (Moll, Amanti, Neff, & Gonzalez, 1992, p. 133). Funds of knowledge represent the historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills, which are often hard to quantify or articulate, but which ultimately enable the team to function effectively and accomplish their mission (Bishop, 1999). Communities of Practice are built around three major commitments: mission,

communitas, and ongoing development of a shared language (Wenger, 2000, p. 229). While the mission and the communitas within MCT's remain robust, this paper makes the case that by taking the time to develop a language that can be shared with people outside the communitas, the Cadre will be able to better assert their authority while, at the same time, more effectively contributing to a comprehensive assessment practice the will benefit the entire MCT community.

Reassessing the Mission Critical Team Assessment Program and Board

One of the primary arguments for giving the Cadre a legitimate voice in Assessment and Selection is that they represent a critical, but separate and distinct culture. One example where a distinct culture was given a voice in the research that was done on their behalf is the Māori people of New Zealand. In partnership with academic researchers the Māori found ways to conduct research on their community that would still honor the Māori language (*Te reo Māori),* knowledge (*matauranga Māori),* custom *(tikanga Māori)* and characteristics (*ahuatanga Māori)* (Bishop, 1995, 1999, 2003; G. H. Smith, 1992; Walker, Eketone, & Gibbs, 2006). They did this by creating a Collaborative Inquiry research program (Bishop, 1995), based on the principle of Kaupapa Māori, which is literally translated as "a Māori way." Collaborative Inquiry is a form of Qualitative research that emerged out of the tradition of Participatory Action Research which was founded to ensure that the individuals, or groups, who will be implementing the outcomes of a research study are also participating in the actual research process (Herr & Anderson, 2005, p. 2). Collaborative Inquiry specifically refers to a process where researchers partner with communities of practice to collaboratively resolve an emergent question (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013, p. 56)**.** In the context of MCT Selection and Assessment, the optimal outcome is not for Scholars to educate Cadre on Trait Theory, or for Cadre to immerse Scholars in a selection experience to increase their awareness and understanding. Instead, it is to recognize that by better integrating their distinct and important perspectives they will be better positioned to unlock the full potential of their Assessment Programs.

While the needs and structure of an MCT Communitas is obviously very different than an indigenous community such as the Māori, the lessons they learned in developing collaborative inquiry communities can easily translate to potential synergies between Academia and the

Communitas by showing that a modern Assessment Program can both improve the predictive capacity while at the same time strengthen the team's distinct language, knowledge, customs and characteristics.

A New Qualitative Model and Methodology

For many Mission Critical Teams, the only time that decision makers may interact with the data associated with a candidate is when the candidate's information is presented at a Selection Board. Given the sheer volume of Qualitative Attribute data collected during an assessment, it

Figure 2 - Successful Candidate

Figure 3 - Unsuccessful Candidate

has been almost impossible to visualize the Attribute data with the same precision and clarity as the Quantitative data associated with Traits. It should be noted that this problem is not unique to just selection programs, but to Assessment Centers as well. Blair Mannix, the Director of Admissions, for the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, notes that in their ongoing efforts to select the most appropriate students, they are constantly fighting their application reviewers' instinct to stereotype applicants to enable quick categorization (Mannix, 2019), due to the fact that Humans "are inconsistent at making summary judgements of complex information (Kahneman, 2011, p. 224)."

To address this inequity, the Sergeant Major of the Operations Training Course within U.S. Army Special Operations Command (USASOC) 1st CIG, developed a methodology where he would organize all qualitative attributes submitted by the Cadre and color code them into three

categories: Red Words = Negative Attributes, Gray Words = Neutral Attributes, and Blue Words = Positive Attributes. He then placed all of the Attributes into a "word cloud" where the size of the word, or phrase, correlated to how often that word, or phrase, appeared in the feedback. The result was that he was able to communicate the Cadre's collective assessment of a Successful (Figure 2) and Unsuccessful (Figure 3) candidate in a manner that was commensurate with the presentation of the Quantitative data related the Traits (Anonymous, 2019b).

After seeing the word cloud methodology shared in an MCTI forum, the Assessment Phase Warrant Officer in the Canadian Special Operations Regiment took the idea one step farther by putting together a word bank made up of terms commonly used by the cadre that was placed on the candidate assessment sheet (Anonymous, 2019a). For example, Cadre's from around the world commonly used terms such as: "Sense of humor, good bloke, team before self, fast learner, performance IQ, dirtbag, solutions not excuses, motivated by higher ideals, bearing/presence, does not require cheerleading, has what it takes, quiet or discreet professional, speaks truth to power, critical not cynical, comfortable in ambiguity and uncertainty, etc."(Cline, 2016). By having a word bank available to the cadre they are starting to advance their commitment as a Community of Practice in developing and evolving a shared language (Wenger, 2000, p. 229). If the Cadre are able to go one step further, and begin developing shared definitions within commonly used descriptors, such as dirtbag (can be good or bad), they can improve the overall accuracy of their assessments as they will all share the same definitions of terms and attributes. The second benefit is that over time, as new words appear on the word bank and old ones are retired, the community will be able to see how the values of the communitas are evolving in the face of emerging and evolving problem sets.

One of the primary benefits of the word cloud is that it helps to offset a cognitive bias called "Anchoring" which occurs when decision become "anchored" to an initial quantitative score, prior to hearing "the story" of a candidate (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). The use of the word cloud acts to offset the impact of cognitive biases such as anchoring by presenting traits and attributes at the same time in ways that are easily understood and digestible. In addition, Selection Boards have begun to sterilize candidates' records, as much as possible, by removing

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pictures, past education, etc. to diminish the possibility that a member of the selection committee might prefer/dismiss a candidate because of the school they graduated from (Goldin & Rouse, 2000). To further offset the "Anchoring" problem, some selection boards have started introducing the candidate in the positive, such as "This is Candidate X, the reason we WANT to select them is because…" and then they list the reason. The intent, in this case, is to anchor the selection committee to the positive and allow the data to either positively confirm or negatively overwhelm the anchoring. By making these changes it allows the Leadership, Scholars and Cadre to all be heard with an equal voice. It also provides the leadership with the ability to compare the quantitative assessments of traits next to the word cloud of attributes in order to more effectively arbitrate any dissonance between the two.

Conclusion

As generations of Cadre pass through Mission Critical Assessment Programs, the pressure to protect the culture and the legacy of the team continued to grow. While this has ensured that the physically stressful training evolutions, including crucible events, remained within Assessment Programs it also led to a gradual upwards creep of standards, as every generation felt they needed to make the process a little harder for the generation that followed. This has often resulted in the unintended consequence making the selection and training pipelines longer and more costly over time. This increase in duration, also acts to increase unintended attrition due to illness, injury or other variables. This means that teams are often spending more time, money, and resources on Assessment and Selection, but graduating fewer candidates. For some current teams this has gotten so bad that they their graduation rates are no longer matching their retirement rates. Additionally, lower graduation rates also tends to increase the "cloning" effect. Those who make it through, look very similar to the people already on the team, which acts to reduce the overall cognitive diversity of a team. Given that Mission Critical Teams were created to solve rapidly emergent complex adaptive problem sets, this might be the greatest existential crisis they are currently facing, without even knowing it.

In order to solve this problem, the teams would need to overcome the "standards paradox." This appears when a team is caught between the pressure to graduate enough candidates to keep the

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team mission ready and the need to protect their legacy. In order to graduate enough students, they need to remove some of the selection evolutions, which they themselves added. At the same time, their responsibility to protect the team standards and legacy, require that they object to any perceived lowering of the standards. Failure to resolve this paradox, or teams which use their legacy as an anchor to justify entrenchment, rather than a platform to evolve or innovate, often fade to irrelevancy.

In order to stay relevant, it is time that the Cadre must take up their responsibility to strengthen both their methodologies and the language in which they communicate their assessments. In doing so, they need to recognize the important long-term benefit of a strong trait-based selection methodology. At the same time Assessment Scholars need to recognize the Cadre as a legitimate Community of Practice that is leveraging valid qualitative research methodologies to assess and communicate candidate attributes. If done correctly, Leadership will have access to two separate and distinct streams of data, that when combined, will increase the Assessment Programs predictive capacity.

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