How I learned where the door was: reflections on being kicked out of a community of pilots

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Asked about his experiences flying in a supersonic trainer with the first American women to become NASA astronauts in 1978, Robert Gibson remarked "*Hearing a female voice on the radio in 1978 was unusual. There weren't that many. If there were any airline pilots at that point, there sure weren't many, so you just never heard female voices on the radio. We'd go cross-country in the T-38s and Sally would be making radio calls, or Rhea'd be making radio calls, and sometimes somebody would come up and say, "What is this? Who is this flying?*"" (Gibson Oral History 2013) Gibson recalls there not being many female voices on the radio–indeed there were few. Until just a few years before, all military aviation was barred to women and airlines selected chiefly from those with thousands of hours of jet aircraft experience, something only practical to achieve as a military pilot (Ganson 2015). While there were only a few women pilots in 1978 in the United States, there were no women astronauts. Thirty years later in 2009 NASA reported that ten percent of their astronauts were women (eds. Martin and Bell 2009), in that same year only 6.2% of all active airmen license holders (the category of people licensed to fly a powered aircraft over 254 lbs) were women (U.S. Civil Airmen Statistics 2016)[1]. The United States Air Force, which only began to allow women to qualify as pilots in 1974, reported only 6.5% of active duty pilots were women in 2020 (Hudson 2020). How has American aviation, with a decades-long head start over NASA, been much slower to integrate women into the role of pilot?

This is a problem our research group, the Aviation Safety Analysts, sought to investigate. Our research explored an archive of discussions on private Facebook groups for professional pilots as well as responses to multiple surveys distributed to pilots via industry and social media channels. My work focused principally on Facebook discussions in a group called "Professional Jet Pilots" (Referred to colloquially and herein as PJP), a closed group where entry is determined by answers to a questionnaire[2] administered by group moderators.

We look specifically at what elements of pilot culture might be bound up in gendered expectations, what Cheryan and Markus call "masculine defaults" (Cheryan and Markus 2020). My personal orientation toward this problem as one of cultural definition is born of my experience in a different high reliability environment, that of naval nuclear power–I maintained and operated a nuclear reactor for the United States Navy from 2003 to 2006 as a Shutdown Reactor Operator and supervised operations as an Engineering Watch Supervisor for two years during that time. Histories of nuclearization of the United States Navy, both folk and official, tend to point to a dramatic shift in what culturally constituted excellence among submarine officers from a risk taking élan to technological discipline (Duncan 1990). As a result my research questions revolved around how a cultural definition of excellence might be bound up in what we will call here masculine defaults, though we had not read Cheryan and Markus's article until well

[1] 2016 year statistics are used because that year's file contains data back to 2009, the year corresponding to our data on NASA astronauts.

[2] We take as given that this questionnaire screens out non-pilots as it is intended but Steiner 1993 reminds us this abstraction may leak.

after data collection was completed so the term used here did not appear in my research questions or research memos among the team.

> RQ1: How do male pilots couch their relationship to the flight deck? How do male pilots couch their relationship to the piloting community (such as it is distinct for them from the flight deck)?
> RQ2: What sort of language do male pilots use to talk about their socialization as pilots?
> RQ3: Where do notions of cognitive load show up in discussions of male pilots about female pilots, CRM, SMS?

This paper is not an attempt to report out answers to those questions.

Why? In microcosm, we faced a similar situation to an American author, A. G. Mojtabai, who hoped to explore attitudes toward nuclear weapons in the Texas town of Amarillo, where final assembly of all nuclear weapons in the United States is completed. Ostensibly a discussion of nuclear and anti-nuclear attitudes, the book takes radically different shape as Mojtabai gets to know Amarillo and discovers the really surprising feature of the town is the depth and breadth of hyper-conservative ideology (Mojtabai 1986). Pro and anti-nuclear sentiment withdraw from her active focus not chiefly because there is little persistent anti-nuclear sentiment to find but because political and religious features of the mid-sized Texas town obtrude too much. The surprising element obtruding to us was the politicized construction of who or what was excluded from spaces where pilot culture itself was constructed. Ultimately, we were excluded from one of those spaces.

In order to investigate construction of culture on the flight deck, we coded a sample of comments on a facebook private group “Professional Jet Pilots”, incidental to the posts disseminating aviation surveys by another member of the Aviation Safety Analysts group who was herself a member of that group and a professional pilot. We coded line-by-line for codes such as:

- “What makes a good pilot” – coded as such if this exact phrase or something very similar appeared in the post.
- “High-pressure” – coded if a comment references the high pressure or high stakes nature of aviation.
- “No place in the cockpit” – Coded this way if a comment stated explicitly that a person or idea had no place in the cockpit. When writing the code memo, we made a note to also check for references to “no place on the flight deck”, the gender inclusive language preferred by the Federal Aviation Administration (Aratani 2021). We needn’t have.

Out of these codes we noted a pattern which carried over from FaceBook discussions to responses to surveys distributed on multiple social media platforms and via industry channels to pilots in corporate and commercial aviation: “keep politics out of the cockpit”. In contrast to the constructed codes above, this appeared to us *in vivo*, supplied by people in our field sites in their words. When we recognized this we decided to return the code to the community and ask them what it meant. In a post on February 16th, Kimberly Perkins, a pilot and one of the

members of Aviation Safety Analysts asked “I keep hearing the phrase "keep politics out of the cockpit"... what does that phrase mean to you exactly?”

The post generated approximately 30 top level replies and within 24 hours Kimberly was banned from the community.

The responses themselves are interesting, but the banning perhaps more so. Why might this have happened? Our research group discussed potential reasons[3] and produced some possibilities. First, our presence as researchers in this community, which never gave informed consent to us specifically, might have been unwelcome. That the periodic presence of one of our team in posts and discussions was tolerated up to that point is immaterial. The question itself might have been a proverbial straw to break the camel’s back or it might simply have been a reminder of our unwelcome presence. Related to this possibility is another, asking the question we did marked us as obviously not a member of the community and *ipso facto* our membership in the private group became illegitimate. One member of the PJP community commented on this specifically, remarking “why would Kimberly [the member of our research group who was also a PJP member] invite this discussion to the group? To look intelligent? Relevant in some way? Or maybe woke? *Out of the loop is what I read above*……naive, ridiculous drivel.” (ellipses in original, emphasis mine) This comment goes in a few different directions, including an invocation of the term “woke”, but the last line here, “out of the loop” might be related to identifying that we were not legitimate members of the community.

Alternately, the question we phrased might have been one which was inappropriate to ask given our relationship to people we hoped would answer it. In asking it we might have breached the limited trust offered to us in co-presence. Put another way, we might have been trusted enough to be present but not trusted enough to ask a more penetrating question. This is not uncommon, nor does it mark the community necessarily. When conducting ethnographic work for a study of homeless men in New York City, Jay Sokolovsky produced a similar breach of trust (Cohen and Sokolovsky 1989, p. 32):

> *“He [a homeless informant] assumed I was a young down and outer and invited me to join him at a local tavern. However, after buying beers I got carried away by the ease with which I seemed to be accepted and began to ask simple questions such as how he had come to live on the Bowery [a homeless community]. Abruptly he banged his fist on the table and shouted “I wouldn’t even tell my own father that,” and stormed out of the bar… I soon learned that the norms of skid row admitted an easy surface conviviality but did not readily permit probing of another’s history.”*

We raise the two reasons above as something of a ward against interpreting too much about our banning from the community from the bulk of responses to our question, which were made by community members, not moderators. Furthermore, the vast majority of responses to the question were just that, answers to our question about what might be an *in vivo* code. Banning us might have been a way of keeping a particular kind of politics out of a piloting community, but determination of that awaits a return to the community or one like it and is not our interest today.

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[3] Our problem is more prosaic than many other issues of trust in anthropology, covered broadly in Jamie Coates’s 2018 review article, Trust and the Other: Recent Directions in Anthropology.

What do we do in this situation? In retrospect our approach courted this outcome. One of the replies to the post was “Don’t answer her polls or questions. She’s just data-mining”. Our presence in this group was conspicuous from the beginning. By the time we posted our question about politics we had already posted several research related questions, often explicitly research focused. One possible approach is to model that undertaken by Asif Iqbal Dawar in investigating local, government, and army actions in small towns in a part of Pakistan on the border with Afghanistan. This is not to assert we face the same risks but to acknowledge that approaching a community of pilots might require consideration of “dissimulation tactics” (Dawar 2020, p. 34).

One important next step should be to reflect our failure back to the scholarly community. In 2019 a group of European economists reported on an experiment they undertook in four different languages of Wikipedia. They produced results only for three of these language communities, because they were recognized as researchers and banned by administrators on the Dutch Wikipedia. In my decade of experience as an administrator on the English Wikipedia what is notable about this outcome is not that it happened but that the researchers reported it. Even having mentioned it, their report was incomplete. They noted that their edits had been reverted in the Dutch Wikipedia (Hinnosaar et al. 2021, p. 10) but it took a journalist from *The Guardian* to report that they had been banned as well (Hern 2020)[4]. Being banned from a community is simultaneously a finding and a result of researcher conduct–we ought to report it out for others to study and critique.

Regardless of what we do, we must return to the research site. When we do, we must not only have a sense of how we might avoid being ejected but also what responsibility we have as researchers to produce a nuanced and fair description of the culture of pilots in the United States. Last year, Rosana Pinheiro-Machado and Lucia Scalco wrote about the responsibility researchers had to present a nuanced ethnography of Brazilian fascists. We close with a quote from that paper (Pinheiro-Machado and Scalco 2021, p. 335):

> “*As we exposed our ideas, names and bodies arguing in favour of nuance, we encountered ever more extreme violent reactions from the far right, including activists moved by the fascist authoritarian impetus. While we have never felt at risk during our fieldwork, our public exposure limited our public circulation, challenged our mental health and ultimately threatened our lives. The line between our male interlocutors and the activists who persecuted us is fine and fragile. The more the scenario radicalises towards the far right, the more the former become aligned with the latter. In one of the online attacks that we suffered by rightist trolls, we noted that several offenders had similar demographic profiles to our interlocutors, which made us question the entire validity of our ethnographic work when we could only feel rage and despair.*”

[4] The Guardian was reporting on a pre-print, hence why a news report on a study appears to predate publication of the study.

‡As a member of the Aviation Safety Analysts and for my teammates, without whom this work would be impossible: Julie Vera, Kimberly Perkins, Sourojit Ghosh. All errors are my own. Find us (soon) at arepilotsok.com

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