

Report to PSO: USMC.2017.0005

Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research
Project Report to Personnel Studies and Oversight
Office:

**Marines' Perspectives on Various Aspects of
Marine Corps Organizational Culture**

*With participant demographics included in Appendix A

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CAVEAT: This research was conducted under Human Subjects
Protection Protocol USMC.2017.0005 and MCU's academic freedom
policy. The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the
individual speakers and researchers and do not necessarily represent the
views of the United States Marine Corps or Davis Defense Group.



About the Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research (MCOCR) Project

What is MCOCR?

The MCOCR Project is a small, exploratory, qualitative research effort intended to gather Marine perspectives on a range of issues related to Marine Corps culture. The project resulted in 150 semi-structured interviews and 32 semi-structured focus groups with 267 unique participants (nine Marines participated in both an interview and a focus group). All participants were volunteers, and the project was conducted under a protocol approved by the Marine Corps Human Research Protection Program. The project was conducted under Marine Corps University's academic freedom policy.

How should the information in this report be used?

Because of the non-representative sample, data and analysis from MCOCR are intended to inform discussions in conjunction with other information sources. They should not be used to make broad claims about Marines or Marine Corps programs and policies.

Were Marine statements fact-checked?

No. The intent of the project was to gather Marine perspectives without regard to whether the perspectives were based on full knowledge of current Marine Corps policies and programs. In some cases, it was important to capture misperceptions, as they have implications for internal Marine Corps messaging.

What are the project's limitations?

1. The MCOCR sample was not designed to be representative of the Marine Corps population in terms of sex, race/ethnicity, MOS, or other characteristics. Therefore, the data cannot be used in statistical analysis designed to make claims about all Marines. Sample demographics are included in the March 2018 report from the project, available at <https://apps.dtic.mil/docs/citations/AD1079774>.
2. The project did not include reservists or recently retired/separated Marines due to Marine Corps interpretation of DoD guidance on information collections at the time the research was designed.
3. We did not actively seek volunteers above E-8s and O-5s; therefore, the senior voice is not strong in the sample.

Who funded and sponsored the project?

The project falls within the normal scope of work of CAOCL's Translational Research Group (TRG), and the majority of the project was funded out of CAOCL's existing budget. Manpower and Reserve Affairs (M&RA) requested that the research be done, but the research design, conduct, and analysis were controlled by TRG. M&RA provided assistance with logistics, travel for research team members who were not part of CAOCL, and funding to accelerate transcription of audio recordings.

When and where were data gathered?

Between August and October 2017, the research team gathered data at the following locations: Pentagon, MCB Quantico, MCB Camp Lejeune, MCAS Cherry Point, MCB Camp Pendleton, MCAGCC 29 Palms, MCAS Yuma, and MCB Camp Butler (Okinawa).

What are the qualifications and characteristics of the research team?

The principal investigator is a cultural anthropologist with more than 20 years of experience working with and doing research on national security organizations, including 10 years leading research teams on projects focused on the Marine Corps. The composition of the MCOCR research team has changed between 2017 and 2020, but team members have possessed graduate-level educational backgrounds in the following disciplines: cultural anthropology, sociology, cultural geography, international relations, education, communication, and evaluation science. Data gathering teams included male and female researchers. To the maximum extent possible, participants were allowed to choose the sex of the researcher with whom they interacted. All team members thus far have been Caucasian. The data gathering team included two members with Marine backgrounds. One was a recently retired field-grade Marine officer, and the other was an active duty company-grade Marine officer. The research team also consulted with other social scientists and Marines during design and analysis.

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Executive Summary

This report provides initial analyses on seven core themes of interest to the Personnel Studies and Oversight Office (PSO) from the Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research (MCOCR) Project. This exploratory research was requested by Manpower and Reserve Affairs and conducted by the Translational Research Group (TRG) at Marine Corps University's Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning.

Based on initial questions from Marine Corps leaders, this report is problem-focused. The focus should not be taken as an indication that Marines spoke exclusively about the negative aspects of their time in the Marine Corps. In fact, it would have been just as feasible to produce a report focused on positive experiences and perspectives. The project yielded several thousand pages of transcripts that can be mined for insights on a broad range of topics over time.

This report is the primary deliverable for the first phase of the MCOCR Project and was produced quickly to support PSO. Analyses on additional topics will be conducted during the second phase of the project. Prioritization of topics and work schedule are being developed to balance additional MCOCR work with TRG's other responsibilities.

Research Intent and Method: The intent of the project is to conduct qualitative research aimed at gathering the experiences and perspectives of Marines related to three broad topics – social cohesion, gender bias, and leadership. The project outcome of Phase 1 is this report. The outcomes of Phase 2 will include a robust data set that can be mined on a range of topics as well as several different types of analyses that can inform problem framing and the design of more structured research and data gathering efforts.¹ *The research was designed to be exploratory rather than to produce fixed, easily quantifiable results or to be fully representative of the Service. Additionally, the leaders requesting the research indicated that they wanted to see confirmatory as well as novel results.* The research team used semi-structured data gathering methods to ensure Marines were able to provide information on related topics. Between August and October of 2017, researchers spoke with 267 individual Marines through 150 in-depth, semi-structured interviews and 32 in-depth, semi-structured focus groups at Marine Corps Base (MCB) Camp Lejeune, Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Cherry Point, the National Capital Region (MCB Quantico, Pentagon), MCB Camp Pendleton, Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center Twentynine Palms, MCAS Yuma, and MCB Camp Butler in Okinawa.

Report Structure and Contents: This report is designed not only to provide preliminary analyses and researcher insights, but also to highlight the complexity and interconnectedness Marines expressed. Therefore, the report structure does not follow a standard format. Note that

¹ This research was conducted under Human Subjects Protection Protocol USMC.2017.0005 and MCU's academic freedom policy. The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the individual speakers and researchers and do not necessarily represent the views of the United States Marine Corps or Davis Defense Group. To improve flow for the reader, researchers have removed filled pauses (e.g. um, uh, you know) that were deemed to have minimal impact on the integrity of the transcript. Brackets are used in the text to add clarity, represent short text removals, and indicate paralanguage, e.g. sighs and laughs.

each section stands on its own to some degree, and it is not necessary to read them in any particular order. Each section begins with a list of key insights/takeaways. The main sections are as follows:

Introduction

PART I: Marines United and the Prevalence of Online Misconduct

PART II: Challenges with and for Leadership

PART III: The Procedural and Social Uses of PFT/CFT Scores

PART IV: What is it like to be both a woman and a Marine?

PART V: Hostile Environments

PART VI: Remaining a Marine: How Enlisted and Officers Deliberate and Decide

PART VII: Cohesion, Leadership, and Difference through the Lens of Humor

Some readers understandably will wonder whether some or all the issues described in this report are merely reflections of broader social issues. It was beyond the scope of this project to gather comparative data from the public, but there is no doubt that some broader social issues are reflected in the Marine Corps. However, even if the challenges described in the following sections were driven entirely by external social forces (which the research team does not think is the case), they would take on a special character in the Marine Corps context. The Marine Corps still needs to understand how social issues translate into the Marine Corps and be able to make decisions about whether and how to address them.

Key Takeaways. Each of the seven sections described above begins with the research team's assessment of key issues highlighted within the narrative. There also are several overarching issues that merited attention, which are covered in the introduction to this report. Of the overarching issues, the researchers assess the following four to be most critical:

1. **Less tangible leadership skills are valued but may not be sufficiently supported by the institution.** Leadership capabilities such as empathy and compassion are praised and valued, but also stigmatized in the ways Marines talk. Marines recognize the value of having and being engaged, empathetic, compassionate leaders. However, they also noted that embodying these values was like having a second job, one for which they were not trained. Additionally, some Marines reported that they found it difficult to account for these less tangible skills in fitness reports and other assessments of themselves and their Marines.
2. **Value conflicts are apparent across a wide range of topics.** Many challenges Marines experience are linked to value conflicts. Sometimes these are conflicts arising from what they thought the Marine Corps would be and what they have actually experienced. Other times the conflicts are more subtle, reflecting different interpretations of or ways of embodying core values and leadership traits. These conflicts may not be avoidable, but they do need to be noticed and managed by leaders at the individual Marine, unit, and Service levels. The degree to which these conflicts were reported also suggests that Marine Corps education and training may need to more explicitly prepare people for managing shifting or conflicting orientations toward values as they progress through their careers.

3. **Expanding, reinforcing, and/or reframing Marine Corps messaging on the following three topics is warranted:**
 - a. **Equality, parity, and equity.** The language Marines used to talk about diversity-related issues and equality may not be sufficient to communicate the difference between parity (viewing equality as “the same for all”) and equity (a perception of equality that takes into account the differing needs and experiences of individuals). Although many acknowledged the importance of understanding the different needs and experiences of their Marines (equity), they continued to conflate equality with sameness (parity) when determining what was fair.
 - b. **Professionalism vs “Political correctness.”** In the Marine Corps, as in other organizations and society as a whole, professionalizing a work environment sometimes means changing behavior and talking habits of a dominant part of a group. For example, humor once seen as normal may now be deemed inappropriate. People in the dominant part of the group often view calls for such restraint as “political correctness” or an indicator of the weakness of other people in the group. However, people in the less dominant parts of the group often have accepted significant constraints on their behavior and speech for long periods of time to fit in. Rather than believing new norms are an accommodation the organization is making for them, they may perceive it as everyone having to live up to the same standards of professional behavior. Marine Corps leaders can, and often do, set the tone for framing changes in workplace climate as professionalism rather than political correctness. Much senior leader messaging also addresses this issue. However, it will be necessary to expand and reinforce these efforts to ensure changes in persistent and pervasive orientations.
 - c. **Consistent messaging at all leader levels.** Working with leaders at all levels of the organization on consistent messaging may help lessen some of the value conflicts experienced by Marines. Marines described many experiences of mixed messages (perhaps unintentional) from senior leaders. They also described many situations in which senior leader messaging was undermined or contradicted by the behavior of more junior leaders and peers.

4. **Marines at all rank levels reported wanting to be part of the solutions.** Regardless of personal perspectives and experiences, the vast majority of male and female Marine participants in this research are engaged, ready, and eager to be part of the solutions to any challenges the Marine Corps faces.

Next Steps. This report represents the conclusion of the first phase of this research project. The research team is currently working with the data set to clean and organize it for more structured analysis. The specific topics for structured analysis and the types and timelines for future reports will be established over the coming months.

Introduction

Background: In response to the March 2017 Marines United Facebook misconduct, General Robert Neller in his testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee stated,

I've gone personally, as all of my leaders have gone, and spoken to literally tens of thousands of Marines and made them understand what their responsibilities are and I think more importantly ... the social media things that we've seen have been – were just indicative of a problem within our culture that we did not properly respect or value the contributions of women in our Corps and that's the problem we have to fix.²

To explore the problem within Marine Corps culture, Manpower and Reserve Affairs (M&RA) requested that the Translational Research Group (TRG) at Marine Corps University's Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning (CAOCL) conduct qualitative research aimed at gathering the experiences and perspectives of Marines.³ The research focused on three broad topics – social cohesion, gender bias, and leadership. However, the research design was deliberately structured in a way that allowed Marines to introduce topics they felt were significant to the overall intent of the research. This approach ensured that we, the research team, did not pre-determine research outcomes by overly restricting discussion.

Research Purpose and Intended Outcome: *The research was designed to be exploratory rather than to produce fixed, easily quantifiable results or to be fully representative of the Service. Additionally, the leaders requesting the research indicated that they wanted to see confirmatory as well as novel results.* The purpose of this type of exploratory research is to allow a population, in this case Marines, to tell researchers and then readers what they think is important within a broad topic. The intended outcome of the project is to provide a pool of Marine experiences and perspectives, coupled with researchers' analyses, that can be used to inform problem framing, more structured research efforts, and leader thinking.

Based on initial questions from Marine Corps leaders, this report is problem-focused. The focus should not be taken as an indication that Marines spoke exclusively about the negative aspects of their time in the Marine Corps. In fact, it would have been just as feasible to produce a report focused on positive experiences and perspectives. The project yielded thousands of pages of transcripts that can be mined for insights on a broad range of topics.

The project is structured in two phases. The first phase included data collection and preliminary analysis focused on delivering initial results to M&RA as quickly as possible. The second phase will involve fully cleaning and anonymizing the interview transcripts to create a data pool suitable for more structured analyses. Structured analysis and reporting will be conducted on

² Ellen Mitchell, "Court-martial possible in Marines nude photo sharing misconduct," 15 June 2017, <http://thehill.com/news-by-subject/defense-homeland-security/338035-court-martial-possible-in-marines-nude-photo>, accessed 6 February 2018.

³ This research was conducted under Human Subjects Protection Protocol USMC.2017.0005. The opinions and conclusions expressed herein are those of the individual speakers and researchers and do not necessarily represent the views of the United States Marine Corps or Davis Defense Group. To improve flow for the reader, researchers have removed filled pauses (e.g. um, uh, you know) that were deemed to have minimal impact on the integrity of the transcript. Brackets are used in the text to add clarity, represent short text removals, and indicate paralanguage, e.g. sighs and laughs.

topics and over a timeline to be determined through discussions with CAOCL's leadership and other Marine Corps organizations.

This Report: As anticipated in the research design and discussions with the organizations requesting the research, Marine perceptions and experiences related to organizational culture do not fall neatly into the categories set out at higher levels. While the Marines United misconduct media coverage was widespread and highly visible, the Marines who took part in this research expressed that the Marines United incidents and similar misconduct are symptoms of challenges that Marines face – some far less visible – rather than *the challenge* in and of themselves. Participants spoke on a wide array of topics and how these topics shape their personal experiences in the Corps as well as how they impact the Marine Corps as a whole. Although we have parsed them out for the purposes of this report, the reader will see that the topics are connected and mutually influencing. Some sections of the report provide a different perspective on the same overarching issue, while other sections shed light on how these issues play out in different contexts or for different people. The structure of this report, therefore, should be seen as a delivery method rather than an effort to enforce a categorization of Marines' experiences.

We selected the examples used in the report because they illustrate some aspect of the theme being covered. Other Marines who participated may not have reported identical experiences and perspectives but did report related or similar ones. So, while each example represents an individual Marine's experience or perspective, each also speaks to a broader issue within the data.

We are using this report not only to provide our preliminary analyses and researcher insights, but also to highlight the complexity and interconnectedness Marines expressed. Therefore, the report structure does not follow a standard format. Each section stands on its own to some degree, and it is not necessary to read them in any particular order.

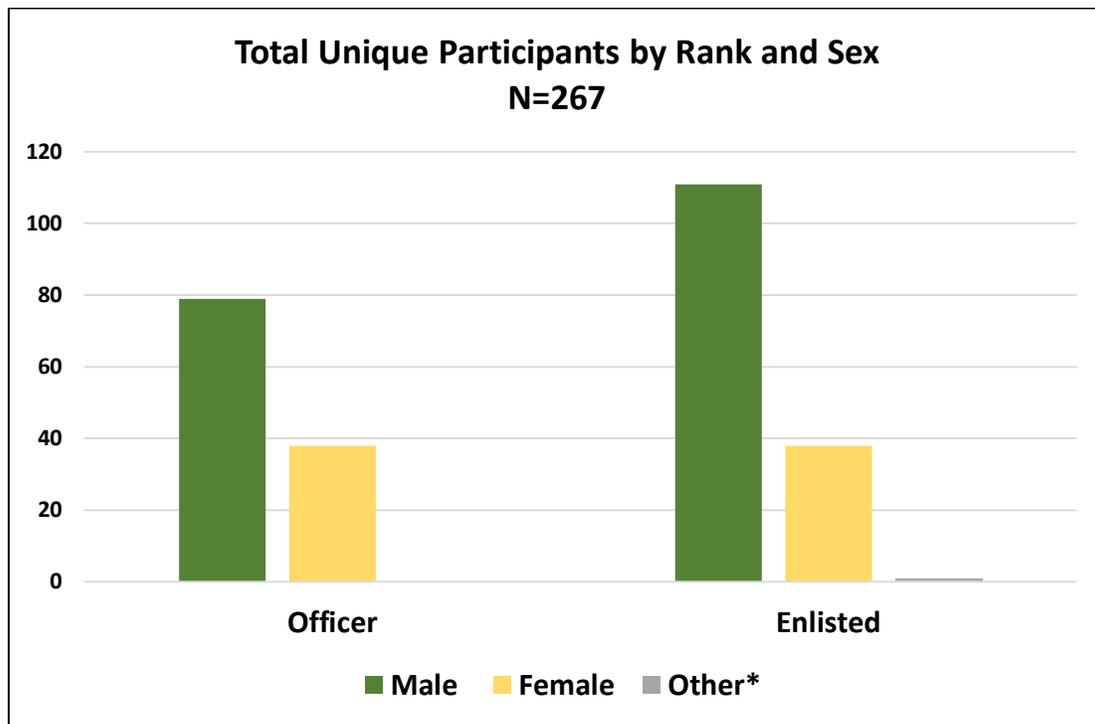
A helpful framework to keep in mind while reading each section is that of centripetal and centrifugal social forces. *Centripetal social forces* are those that pull individuals together and increase organizational resilience. These come in many forms, such as shared hardship followed by success, certain types of humor, common traditions, history, and a shared culture. The Marine Corps is exceptionally good at promoting this type of *esprit de corps* in general. However, there are other *centrifugal social forces* that pull people and organizations apart over time, leading to poor cohesion and a fractured sense of group identity. These forces are also present in the Corps. Centripetal and centrifugal social forces crosscut this report. It is impossible to put most topics on one side of the social force dualism or the other. For example, while humor serves to unite Marines and provides levity for many, it also can alienate others. Highlighting the complexity of these topics serves to better inform possible solutions.

Some readers understandably will wonder whether some or all the issues described in this report are merely reflections of broader social issues. It was beyond the scope of this project to gather comparative data from the public, but there is no doubt that some broader social issues are reflected in the Marine Corps. However, even if the challenges described in the following sections were driven entirely by external social forces (which we do not think is the case), they would take on a special character in the Marine Corps context. Additionally, even when a change

or challenge is clearly linked to external social trends, the Marine Corps still needs to understand how the issue translates into the Marine Corps and be able to make decisions about whether and how to address it.

Participant Demographics and a Note on Methods

From August to October 2017, we spoke with 267 individual Marines through 150 in-depth, semi-structured interviews and 32 in-depth, semi-structured focus groups at Marine Corps Base (MCB) Camp Lejeune, Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Cherry Point, the National Capital Region (MCB Quantico, Pentagon), MCB Camp Pendleton, Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center (MCAGCC) Twentynine Palms, MCAS Yuma, and MCB Camp Butler in Okinawa. The table below shows the demographic breakdown of participants according to rank and sex. Additional demographic data are available in Appendix A.



* One individual identified as transgender. Subsequently, due to potential risk of participant identification, this category is being included in the male category.

In order to rapidly transmit insights from the research effort, this report is based on preliminary researcher analysis rather than structured data analysis, which will be done in the second phase of the research project. A structured analysis of thousands of pages of transcribed interviews and focus groups will take a considerable length of time. We formed the report’s sections on the basis of analytic work conducted before and during the process of data collection and during the subsequent review of interview and focus group transcripts. We recorded insights in memos after each interview and focus group as well as in our personal field journals. Additionally, we had copious discussions about our analyses, often challenging or affirming each other’s perceptions.

We decided on the themes presented in this report as a result of these discussions and our understanding of the topics of most interest to the organizations requesting the research. The themes presented here proved to be those for which we had some of the strongest collective insights and that might best lay the foundation for subsequent reports and studies.

We as researchers do not have direct experience with some of the structures and processes, such as fitness reports and the promotion process, described by Marines who participated in the research. Within the time constraints of this report, we did not have the capacity to critically assess the accuracy or fairness of Marines' perceptions of these issues. What follows, therefore, needs to be read with the understanding that we are characterizing what Marines reported, not necessarily validating their claims.

Key Takeaways

Each of the following sections begins with the research team's assessment of key issues highlighted within the narrative. However, there also are several overarching issues that merited attention.

Marines want to be part of the solutions.

Regardless of personal perspectives and experiences, the vast majority of male and female Marine participants in this research are engaged, ready, and eager to be part of the solutions to any challenges the Marine Corps faces.

Message consistency remains a challenge.

Marines described many experiences of mixed messages (perhaps unintentional) from senior leaders. They also described many situations in which senior leader messaging was undermined or contradicted by the behavior of more junior leaders and peers.

Less tangible leadership skills are valued but may not be sufficiently supported by the institution.

Leadership capabilities such as empathy and compassion are praised and valued but also stigmatized in the ways Marines talk. Marines recognize the value of having and being engaged, empathetic, compassionate leaders. However, they also noted that embodying these values was like having a second job, one for which they were not trained. Additionally, some Marines reported that they found it difficult to account for these less tangible skills in fitness reports and other assessments of themselves and their Marines.

The reasons for Marines' orientations toward Marine Corps values – resilient or brittle – warrant further attention, as it may affect reporting of misconduct, performance, and retention.

Across many different topics, Marines told stories that reflected a key decision-point in their careers. When faced with a Marine Corps and/or leadership that did not live up to their expectations, some resolved to stay and make things different through their presence and actions, suggesting a resilient orientation to Marine Corps values. Others began to disconnect and plan to leave, suggesting a more brittle orientation. Marines also described how tough decisions (e.g.,

when reporting an issue, leading Marines, making career choices, etc.) could become even tougher when there was a value conflict. The nature of the conflict was often a disconnect between the values that attracted the individual to the Marine Corps in the first place and some other set of values the Marine encountered in the institution.

Value conflicts are apparent across a wide range of topics.

As indicated in other takeaways, many challenges Marines experience are linked to value conflicts. Sometimes these are conflicts arising from what they thought the Marine Corps would be and what they have actually experienced. Other times the conflicts are more subtle, reflecting different interpretations of or ways of embodying core values and leadership characteristics. These conflicts may not be avoidable, but they do need to be noticed and managed by leaders at the individual Marine, unit, and Service levels. The degree to which these conflicts were reported also suggests that Marine Corps education and training may need to more explicitly prepare people for managing shifting or conflicting orientations toward values as they progress through their careers.

More explicit messaging about equality, parity, and equity is warranted.

The language Marines used to talk about diversity-related issues and equality may not be sufficient to communicate the difference between parity (viewing equality as “the same, for all”) and equity (a perception of equality that takes into account the differing needs and experiences of individuals). Although many acknowledged the importance of understanding the different needs and experiences of their Marines (equity), they continued to conflate equality with sameness (parity) when determining what was fair.

The Marine Corps should expand and reinforce its efforts to reframe “political correctness” as professionalism.

In the Marine Corps, as in other organizations and society as a whole, professionalizing a work environment sometimes means changing behavior and talking habits of a dominant part of a group. For example, humor once seen as normal may now be deemed inappropriate. People in the dominant part of the group often view calls for such restraint as “political correctness” or an indicator of the weakness of other people in the group. However, people in the less dominant parts of the group often have accepted significant constraints on their behavior and speech for long periods of time to fit in. Rather than believing new norms are an accommodation the organization is making for them, they may perceive it as everyone having to live up to the same standards of professional behavior. Marine Corps leaders can, and often do, set the tone for framing changes in workplace climate as professionalism rather than political correctness. Much senior leader messaging also addresses this issue. However, it will be necessary to expand and reinforce these efforts to ensure changes in persistent and pervasive orientations.

Marine perceptions about the causes of leadership problems are not uniform.

Marines have high standards for their leaders, and when leaders do not live up to or at least strive to meet those standards, it creates problems both acute and chronic. However, Marines attribute both specific instances of and trends in poor leadership to a wide range of causes, such as too-rapid promotion, inconsistencies between Marine Corps messaging and actions in terms of what makes Marines successful, good leaders leaving the Corps, lack of appropriate education and

training, etc. This suggests that messaging about efforts to improve leadership will need to be explicit about actions being taken.

Junior Marines not feeling a sense of purpose was reported as a key leadership challenge.

While more work with the data is needed to assess how wide this perception is, preliminary analysis suggests that Marine leaders perceive the lack of a sense of purpose on the part of junior Marines, in part due to the lack of combat operations, is a significant challenge for leaders. While instilling a sense of purpose in their Marines is always part of a leader's responsibilities, there may be ways the Marine Corps can better support them to do so.

The slow pace of change and problem fixing may need to be more clearly explained to junior Marines waiting for solutions.

When thinking and talking about addressing problems, Marine leaders may need to be attuned to junior Marines' different sense of time. Taking a few months to make progress on fixing an issue may seem fast to Marines familiar with the slow pace of bureaucracy but can be taken as negligent leadership if not well explained to junior Marines.

Some Marine patterns of speech may complicate the Marine Corps' ability to get clear information on influences on and causes of problems.

When Marines tell their own stories, they are rich with complexity. When they talk about other Marines or the Marine Corps, they significantly simplify their explanations, often attempting to "boil down" influences or causes to one factor. This makes for a good narrative or quick answer but may be an overly simplistic, if not inaccurate, way of understanding the dynamics of the Marine Corps. This has significant implications for other research and strongly suggests that at least some aspects of more structured data gathering efforts need to be designed to capture complexity.

Simple or crisis-mode solutions are not the right approach.

The experiences of male and female Marines related to bias and online misconduct are entangled with many other issues such as trust, respect, inclusion, messaging, and leadership. Also, the perspectives of both male and female Marines on these issues are wide ranging and cannot be easily categorized along lines of sex, race, age, or other factors. The Marine Corps needs to invest in long term, deliberative strategies and assessments.

Principal Investigator Note

Across many of these topics, readers will see that Marine perspectives on the reasons for bias as well as explanations for gendered behavior (e.g., "boys will be boys") are influenced by an unspoken but powerful set of folk theories about the role of biology in driving male and female behavior. Although there clearly are biological differences between men and women, there currently is no evidence that these differences include fixed drivers for the kinds of complex social behaviors discussed by Marines. This same set of folk theories was woven through many of the leadership discussions and briefs during the activities surrounding the initial response to the Marines United misconduct. Setting aside concerns about having Marine thinking and decisions based on non-scientific understandings of the relationship between biology and

behavior, there are other issues. While it may seem like a small thing, the influences of these folk theories are insidious and can lead to underlying assumptions that are only noticed as biased or incorrect when made explicit. To take one simplistic example, in focusing blame for online misconduct on women who provided explicit pictures, men are subtly presented as unable to help themselves because they are driven by their genetic “programming” to behave in sexually aggressive ways toward women regardless of context, whereas women are presented as the ones responsible for anticipating and preventing such behavior by behaving at all times in ways designed to reduce the temptation their presence presents to men. Clearly, this view of male Marines is not the message the Marine Corps intends, yet it and related sub-messages are the unintended freight carried into the Marine Corps by the way some issues are framed. Although it is beyond the scope of this project to address all the scientific and evidentiary challenges with how Marines and the Marine Corps think about the issues in this report, we would be remiss if we did not note that there are problems that should be investigated.

Next Steps

This report represents the conclusion of the first phase of this research project. The research team is currently working with the data set to clean and organize it for more structured analysis. The specific topics for structured analysis and the types and timelines for future reports will be established over the coming months.

Overview of Themes

PART I: Marines United and the Prevalence of Online Misconduct

We begin by talking about the Marines United misconduct, providing participants' general perspectives on the issue and on the response from leadership as well as personal experiences of online picture sharing.

PART II: Challenges with and for Leadership

As one of the most pervasive topics, we foreground leadership in Part II. This section talks about how bad leaders are able to rise through the ranks as well as how empathy is an important but undervalued leadership tool. This section lays the important groundwork for subsequent sections, as leadership is an integral aspect of so many of the challenges that the Marines with whom we spoke faced.

PART III: The Procedural and Social Uses of PFT/CFT Scores

We highlight the procedural and social uses of Physical Fitness Test/Combat Fitness Test (PFT/CFT) scores in Part III. Using Marine voices, we explore how the valuation of physical fitness and measurable standards has perhaps overshadowed other important aspects of being a good Marine and a good leader.

PART IV: What is it like to be both a woman and a Marine?

This section provides a "grand tour" exploration of some of the everyday challenges faced by the female Marines with whom we spoke. These challenges often involved encountering stereotypes and perceptions that construe women as dangerous and inferior.

PART V: Hostile Environments

In this section, we present three seemingly unrelated topics that have two elements in common. They all are Marine challenges that surfaced unexpectedly in interviews and focus groups, and they all involve Marines' experiencing hostility (to varying degrees) in specific environments: the aviation community, the barracks, and the workplace as experienced by pregnant or breastfeeding Marines.

PART VI: Remaining a Marine: How Enlisted and Officers Deliberate and Decide

This section looks at participants' deliberations about staying in and/or leaving the Marine Corps. These deliberations tie back to several of the issues discussed in preceding sections, including leadership and bad behavior. The section also provides examples of Marines' expressing and reacting to disillusionment with the Marine Corps.

PART VII: Cohesion, Leadership, and Difference through the Lens of Humor

We end with humor. While a seemingly frivolous topic, the subject of humor unexpectedly proved to be an immensely rich and multi-faceted avenue of investigation, providing insights on the issues of leadership, cohesion, and gender as well as other forms of "difference."

PART I: Marines United and the Prevalence of Online Misconduct

In detailing the diversity of topics Marines brought up when talking about Marines United, this section demonstrates how the problem exceeds misconduct on social media, and that, in regard to the misconduct itself, sexually explicit pictures are only part of the issue. Women also had to deal with disparaging comments on pictures in which they were fully clothed and doing ordinary Marine activities. Often, women brought up these stories with an unsurprised attitude that indicated that they were used to putting up with such behavior and worse. This section also provides Marines' perspectives on senior leadership's response to the Marines United misconduct and details a potential failure on the part of unit leadership to heed the message coming down from senior leadership.

This section explores the impetus behind this research – the Marines United misconduct. In asking Marines for their opinions on the misconduct, we found the following:

- 1) The scope of opinions on why the Marines United misconduct occurred was broad. However, some common perceptions stood out. These included the following: the bad behavior of the type seen on Marines United is also seen in wider society; the sex and age demographics of the Marine Corps exacerbate the problem; “bad apples” are responsible for the misconduct; technology makes the problem more visible; however, a focus solely on technology's role in this type of bad behavior misses the mark.
- 2) Many female Marines seemed unsurprised by the Marines United misconduct, and several told stories in which their pictures were shared without their consent. In all cases, the Marines in these pictures were fully clothed and doing “normal” activities and yet had to deal with disparaging comments. Women's relatively nonchalant attitude toward such misconduct may be indicative of the fact that the mistreatment of women is pervasive and becoming normalized.
- 3) Marines thought that Marine Corps' senior leadership sent the right message in response to the misconduct, but that message was not always being enacted by unit leadership. This potentially links to issues of poor leadership that we discuss later in the section on leadership challenges.

What do Marines think about Marines United?

How Marines discussed Marines United was influenced to some degree by what they and the researchers were discussing at the time the topic arose. When asked about whether this is a unique problem for the Marine Corps or the military in general, many Marines talked about the problem as one that plagues American society more broadly, not as one that is specific to the organization. Some suggested, however, that within the Corps, this societal problem is exacerbated by the demographics. One female major explained,

It is a society-at-large problem. The Marine Corps is a microcosm of society. It's a skewed microcosm, where we are 93% men, 7% women. And what you have is a whole bunch of dudes who again we talked about the type of folk who view women as a threat because of their perception – which comes from society – that if a woman can do what they can do, somehow they're less masculine. So Marines United was born of that, and

you have some of that mob, mob mentality where nobody says anything because nobody else is saying anything.⁴

Another example comes from a male captain, who combined the societal perspective with the argument that “bad apples” – part of the 10% that Marines routinely identified as problematic – can likely be blamed for the bulk of the misconduct.

Yeah, it’s society as a whole, isn’t it? Absolutely. ‘Cause everybody’s taking their little hate groups and now they put them on the internet. I mean I would venture to guess the majority of Marines, at least especially the ones that were adding to it and causing it, probably weren’t your most stellar Marines, obviously. And obviously they had some character flaws and issues ‘cause I mean revenge porn just seems to be a more common charge that we’re giving Marines these days partly ‘cause it’s more accessible to do it.⁵

The captain’s comment also addresses the aspect of technology. Some Marines suggested that Marines’ misconduct towards women is not a new problem at all but that new technology provides a more visible and accessible platform for an old issue. A male lieutenant colonel remarked, “This a virtual hog board. I don’t know why we’re surprised.”⁶ A male major explained,

Easy answer is, it was always there. They’ve just found a common forum where they were [*inaudible*], right? If someone’s going to be racist in their shop, in a shop full of Hispanics and blacks, they’re probably going to keep their fucking mouth shut. But if someone is racist online in a page full of racist– other racist people, all of a sudden, they can let their freak flag fly and make all the racist comments that they want to make.⁷

But even while technology may have created a new space for an old issue, the emphasis on the technology itself (and the policies surrounding its use) is misplaced, as a male captain explained, Speaking of the social media stuff – there’s a question I kind of have there. I read a decent editorial. It’s a short opinion piece, but it basically said, so I think a lot of the response to the Marines United stuff was, you know, policy on use of social media. It’s like, it’s not really the issue, is it? Social media is just a medium. The actions have nothing to do with social media. It was, the opinion piece was like, how is this the response like that we need a new policy on social media? It doesn’t freaking matter that it was on social media. Maybe that kind of gets at that whole like, what’s the messaging from the top? “Don’t put that stuff on social media.” Don’t think that’s really the issue.⁸

Male Marines frequently gave speculative and analytical answers as to why they believe the Marines United misconduct occurred. Female Marines, on the other hand, often spoke from their personal experiences. Many women were unsurprised by the behavior of those on Marines United because they live out related struggles every day. This incident was only the tip of an iceberg of problems with which they have been dealing since before they earned their eagle, globe, and anchor. One female captain mentioned, “I wasn’t too terribly surprised, especially that

⁴ Participant #207, Major, Interview, Pentagon, 7 September 2017.

⁵ Participant #016, Captain, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 22 August 2017.

⁶ Participant #618, Lieutenant Colonel, Focus Group, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 18 September 2017.

⁷ Participant #126, Major, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 19 September 2017.

⁸ Participant #105, Captain, Focus Group, MCB Quantico, 6 September 2017.

it came from our organization.”⁹ A female sergeant echoed this sentiment, saying, “I wasn’t surprised that it happened. I was more surprised that it took so long for something like that to get highlighted because that’s been a problem like forever.”¹⁰

As will be discussed in more depth below, this issue goes further than sharing and commenting on sexually explicit photos. Multiple female Marines reported finding photos of themselves in full uniform being shared and commented on in an inappropriate manner. One female corporal explained,

It was at the beginning of the gender integration experiment, and it was just a regular picture of me and one of the girls from— it was at the school house, and you could see like the AAV in the background, and there are just all kinds of negative comments like, “They don’t belong in our MOS¹¹, let alone the Marine Corps” kind of thing. And, actually, one of my crew chiefs actually posted on there, was like, “She was one of my best crewmen. She did this, that, and the other,” and actually defended me. But it was just like they can take pictures that aren’t even in that kind of dirty context kind of thing and still flip it around to, you know?¹²

Personal Stories of Picture-Sharing and Commenting

The Marines United misconduct, once publicized, put on display behaviors that seemed “not surprising” to many female Marines, as they encounter such actions in both online and interpersonal spaces. However, the ease of making personal things public through the use of social media has raised the stakes on choices Marines make in personal relationships. One of our participants, a female lance corporal,¹³ said her Marine ex-boyfriend posted a photograph of her along with her name and barracks address, prompting harassment from others. From this experience, she concluded that she and other women should be more careful of what photos they take and send, while men should have integrity when it comes to receiving photographs in trust. When it comes to sexually explicit images on social media sites, this lance corporal and other Marines attributed responsibility to both men and women.

In addition, other women had firsthand experiences like the corporal quoted at the end of the preceding section. That is, they too had been photographed in uniform while they were performing regular Marine activities. These pictures were also posted to the same or similar online sites and received rude and disrespectful comments. In these instances, the women were unaware that the photograph existed and, therefore, had no control over where or when it was posted. Furthermore, the photograph itself was of a professional activity, but the comments tended to be personal and insulting.

⁹ Participant #235, Captain, Interview, MCAS Yuma, 26 September 2017.

¹⁰ Participant #273, Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Butler, 19 October 2017.

¹¹ Military occupational specialty.

¹² Participant #040, Corporal, Focus Group, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

¹³ Participant #060, Lance Corporal, Interview, MCAS Cherry Point, 24 August 2017.

For example, two enlisted female Marines were photographed in their Charlies. One was decorated with a Purple Heart. Their photo was turned into a meme with the caption, “here’s a list of the sandwiches you’re going to make.”^{14,15} Another woman was photographed in boots and utilities while participating in a three-legged race on a Marine field day. One of the comments under this photograph called her the “beer gut blonde.”¹⁶ In another example, an enlisted man who works with several female sergeants said their unit was videoed while attending a memorial ceremony for a Marine who was murdered. He continued, “So, someone took a screen grab from that memorial video of this fallen Marine. Then put [it] on a page, like, ‘Hey, check out the tits on this one,’” referencing one of the female sergeant attendees.¹⁷

Online insults are not limited to photographs or videos of women. One staff sergeant observed how a news story about a male Marine’s misconduct can become a forum for insulting women in the comments thread. Referencing the online response to the colonel convicted of molestation, “even in that forum – like everybody should be angry about what he did to that little girl, right? – somewhere in the comments there’s something about a female Marine.”¹⁸

Online disrespect presents a conundrum. Comments can be dismissed. After all, who knows if they represent what individuals really think and whether Marines or civilians have posted them? However, they also echo prior experiences and encounters female Marines have had. One female captain described the frustration and exhaustion that have built up over her career. She, too, was photographed in her uniform and mocked online (“women should be in the kitchen”).¹⁹ To her, this was nothing new; her sex had been used to undermine her before. Worse was the memory of other times she was brushed off by Marine leaders. As a 2nd lieutenant, for instance, she advocated shutting down the Just the Tip of the Spear²⁰ website but was told she was being “overly sensitive.” The captain went on, “it gets tiring after a while if you’re continually proving yourself.”²¹ For her and others, these professional experiences add up.

Female participants described how women go through a series of personal deliberations about whether and how to speak up. They reported the following: Often, it is easier to just tolerate the behavior. Sometimes fatigue from constantly feeling compelled to defend self and others sets in. Sometimes the fear of social and career impacts silences women, and sometimes, it is just uncomfortable to discuss feelings of marginalization. One officer said she was uncomfortable discussing what it is like for women in the military even with her husband, who is also a Marine, which is why she surprised herself when she finally spoke passionately in front of her peers in a professional military education (PME) setting during a spontaneous discussion the director of the

¹⁴ “Make me a sandwich” is a phrase that is sometimes leveraged against women to imply they should stick to the domestic endeavors of traditional gender roles.

¹⁵ Participant #601, Sergeant, Interview, Pentagon, 6 September 2017.

¹⁶ Participant #040, Corporal, Focus Group, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

¹⁷ Participant #115, Sergeant, Focus Group, MCB Camp Pendleton, 13 September 2017.

¹⁸ Participant #639, Staff Sergeant, Interview, MCAS Yuma, 26 September 2017.

¹⁹ Participant #604, Captain, Interview, Pentagon, 6 September 2017.

²⁰ Just the Tip of the Spear, much like Marines United, started as a Facebook page where veteran and active duty Marines could share funny and supportive posts. However, some of the humor appears to denigrate female Marines.

²¹ Participant #604, Captain, Interview, Pentagon, 6 September 2017.

school led after the Marines United story broke. Her colleagues explained the misconduct away as immature behavior, symptomatic of “kids these days.”²² The officer said this interpretation hurt her, and she cut them off, saying,

It's not a millennial using social media. It goes against the very core of what we're made of, why we serve, why we die, die for each other. Like how, ... those men that posted those things about women on Marines United stole their honor from them. I mean they took from them something that they can never get back, while they were just— already in a situation that— it's already hard being a woman in the Marine Corps.²³

Because this officer was so accustomed to keeping her emotions in check, she was unsure of how her colleagues would react. She did not expect that a combat arms officer would later tell her that her statement made him “change the way I’m going to lead in the future.”²⁴ This is a potential success story in how leadership may use misconduct to generate discussion among men and women. However, it would be a mistake to conclude that open conversations like these are easy to come by or will always yield such positive results. This officer repeatedly attributed her compulsion to speak up as well as her colleague’s response to her statement to the *trust* they had built up through the academic debates they had had throughout the year. Unfortunately, trust is a hard thing to build in an organization that sends both subtle and overt mixed messages about whether or not women belong.

How is leadership doing in responding to online misconduct?

When it came to how leadership was tackling the issue of online misconduct, Marines discussed the response at both the senior leadership and the unit leadership levels. Many Marines thought senior leadership was on the right track or doing what it could “from above.” They discussed the various tools (Page 11s, training, education, etc.) and their relative effectiveness. One female Marine thought the Commandant nailed it in his brief. “He said it himself when he came down here like, ‘men, stop being fucking dirty men.’ He said it himself, ‘like stop doing that shit.’”²⁵

However, several Marines expressed concerns about the sincerity of the efforts. One colonel referred to the use of Page 11s as a “cover your ass”²⁶ measure. One female gunnery sergeant thought the Marine Corps’ willingness to talk about these issues was a good step but questioned,

But is it genuine or is it disingenuous? You know what I mean? ... Do they actually care about protecting the reputation of the young women who trusted those young men with those photos? Do we care about raising the bar for the young men who are actually participating in that behavior?²⁷

Some felt like the message, though correct, was not enough. Several Marines wanted more than words from senior leaders. As a staff sergeant expressed, “When I saw that video, when I saw

²² Participant #605, Major, Interview, Pentagon, 6 September 2017.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Participant #234, Sergeant, Focus Group, MCAS Yuma, 26 September 2017.

²⁶ Participant #607, Colonel, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 18 September 2017.

²⁷ Participant #218, Gunnery Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 14 September 2017.

[the Commandant's] message to the Marine Corps, like, 'that's, that's it, sir? You're just gonna tell us to be like better people?' That's not working."^{28,29}

Another Marine offered that she was excited that the Commandant had come to her Basic School class right after the Marines United misconduct had come to light, but she was disappointed in his response when a female peer stood up to ask him a question about how to lead and mentor in light of the issues raised in the misconduct.

I would have expected him to say something like it's important that you instill the Marine Corp values da da da da. ... I felt like she kind of threw him a softball, and he could have hit it out of the park because we wanted our male peers to see this is coming from all the way at the top. You need to instill in your Marines and in your platoons that professionalism is the most important thing. ... and he didn't do it. [*laughs*] I was like, are you serious? ... He doesn't get it. How can you fix something you don't get?³⁰

At the unit level, several Marines provided examples of leaders' response that implied to them that the leadership actually was not committed to changing behavior. For example, one female major described how a female corporal in her unit reported to their leadership that some Marines had nude pictures of her. As a result, one staff non-commissioned officer (SNCO) received a non-judicial punishment (NJP) and was reduced in rank, but then he had his rank restored. Meanwhile, the corporal was questioned about why she took the pictures. The major felt that the enlisted woman was unduly criticized, whereas the widespread behavior of "trading images of women Marines like baseball cards" was not addressed adequately by her leadership in her opinion.³¹

Another corporal's experience illustrates a lack of professionalism and commitment to change in unit leadership. She recounted what she overheard from two sergeants sitting behind her in the theater while attending the I MEF³² sergeant major's brief about the Marines United misconduct. She reported that the sergeants said,

Well, if they weren't such fucking sluts and didn't send nudies to these guys and maybe we wouldn't have these problems in the fucking first place. If you don't want people looking at your picture, then why the fuck are you sending it out there, like of your pussy or your titties?³³

The words and actions from unit leadership in response to picture sharing and misconduct reveal the complexity of the challenge facing the Marine Corps. Messaging "from above" is sometimes ineffective in the face of explicit and implicit biases "from below."

²⁸ Participant #216, Staff Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 13 September 2017.

²⁹ This statement echoes concerns raised in previous TRG research projects on resilience and ethics conducted by TRG. Training that focuses on declaratives, dos and don'ts, may be insufficient for complex topics. Whether in training or in later follow-up with peers and leaders, Marines need time to practice decision-making and navigating value conflicts through discussion and scenarios. This research is available on request to the principal investigator.

³⁰ Participant #268, 2nd Lieutenant, Interview, MCB Camp Butler, 19 October 2017.

³¹ Participant #305, Major, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 12 September 2017.

³² 1st Marine Expeditionary Force.

³³ Participant #309, Corporal, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 14 September 2017.

PART II: Challenges with and for Leadership

The theme of leadership permeated almost every topic of conversation in some form or another. In what follows, we distill this broad topic into two threads: 1) the reasons bad leaders can exist and rise in the ranks in the Marine Corps and 2) the role of empathy in leadership. Marines had much to say about bad leaders and the reasons why they can flourish in the Marine Corps. They discussed their perceptions on the institutional values and processes and individual decisions and actions that provide the opportunity for bad leaders to rise in the ranks. Likewise, Marines had much to say about good leaders. In many cases, qualities related to *empathy* stood out, as participants discussed empathy as a tool that can be used to cultivate trust in leadership and strengthen cohesion, despite being somewhat at odds with the stoic character of the Marine Corps. The complexity of leadership issues raises many questions as to how to ensure the best, brightest, and most capable Marines take the Corps into the future, and thus, this topic warrants further attention from senior leadership.

Why are there bad leaders?

*I've seen a lot of good Marines that haven't been promoted, but I'm sure the master sergeant here has seen Marines that are E7s, E8s, and E9s and you wonder how the hell they ever got there.*³⁴

~ Gunnery Sergeant, MCB Camp Pendleton

Many Marines to whom we spoke had stories to tell about bad leaders, those Marines who set bad examples, were more interested in themselves and their own careers, did not care for their Marines, were incompetent in their jobs or as leaders, or were mean.³⁵ It provoked in us the same question raised by the gunnery sergeant quoted above – how did they get there? We gathered initial insights from the data to help answer this question. The Marines who participated in the research had many ideas as to what might be happening to allow these Marines to rise in the ranks. This section will discuss Marine perceptions of what is emphasized in the promotion/selection process, the limitations of the tools Marines have available, personnel management decisions and policies, the shrinking pool of quality Marines to fill the higher ranks, and leadership complicity in the problem. The following themes stood out:

- 1) The promotion process privileges easily measured standards, especially physical standards. This emphasis potentially blinds leadership to other values, capabilities, and qualities, including those that create a good leader, such as humility, empathy, and maturity.
- 2) Marines talked about how the tools available to evaluate Marines, both in the promotion process and when disciplining Marines, have limitations that do not allow them to provide leadership an accurate or complete assessment of an individual's quality or merit. Some of these limitations are cultural (how the users interpret the purpose of the tool), and some are procedural. Senior leaders may want to dig deeper into this area, as slight adjustments may yield significant gains.

³⁴ Participant #614, Gunnery Sergeant, Focus Group, MCB Camp Pendleton, 14 September 2017.

³⁵ There were also many stories of good leadership and leaders. This section – why there are bad leaders – focuses solely on what processes and situations may be allowing bad leaders to flourish and rise in the ranks.

- 3) Marines discussed how the emphasis on faces and spaces in personnel management decisions is challenging the development of leaders in the Marine Corps. They talked about the speed of promotions in the junior ranks and as a result of the draw down and how this speed coupled with the emphasis on measurable standards in the promotion process hampers selection of qualified and quality Marines and places Marines who are not prepared for leadership roles into leadership positions.
- 4) While some personnel management processes, such as the tattoo policy, facilitated the draw down, they also influenced the pool of quality candidates available to rise in the ranks. How the Marine Corps defines quality in a Marine and sets qualifications for promotion impacts both the pool of qualified individuals and, potentially, the heterogeneity of the force.
- 5) Qualified and capable Marines are seeking better options in the civilian world; others face obstacles within the Corps that inhibit their rising in the ranks. Identifying and removing these obstacles will allow for those Marines, who otherwise are quality and qualified Marines, to flourish.
- 6) There are bad leaders in the Corps, and they in turn perpetuate the problem through favoritism, incompetence, complicity, and self-focus. Marines described leaders' not holding themselves or others accountable, not mentoring or developing their juniors, employing favoritism for promotions and opportunities, modeling bad leadership, or privileging their career progression in their decision making and talked about the role leadership plays in allowing bad leaders to flourish in the Corps.

The Promotion Process

Marines talked about promotions and personnel evaluations a lot. That makes sense as this is how they determine if they are considered by the institution as good or bad Marines and, specifically, Marine leaders. As a female 1st lieutenant pointed out, “the whole goal is to develop and foster Marine Corps leaders.”³⁶ A sergeant continued, “in the promotions manual, the promotion system is not used as a reward for past actions. It shows confidence in your leadership. It shows confidence in you, your ability to lead.”³⁷ Thus, in the promotion process, one would expect aspects of leadership to figure prominently in how people are evaluated. While aspects of leadership may be represented on the forms, many Marines to whom we spoke felt that the promotion process emphasized the wrong things or those more easily measured and did not provide a balanced look at the Marines. A master gunnery sergeant put it this way, “The Marine Corps promotion system doesn't promote leaders. It promotes numbers.”³⁸ These numbers include PFT/CFT scores, time in service, check in the box career path, PME completion, etc. A captain at MCAS Yuma expressed frustration on the emphasis on physical standards. “‘Oh, you're a 300 PFTer? You must be an awesome leader.’ That is the biggest bullshit ever. But that's how the promotion boards see it. They see that for the senior enlisted. ‘Oh, he should be a sergeant major because he can run a 300 PFT’ or ‘She can do 20 pull ups.

³⁶ Participant #045, 1st Lieutenant, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

³⁷ Participant #130, Sergeant, Focus Group, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 20 September 2017.

³⁸ Participant #503, Master Gunnery Sergeant, Interview, Pentagon, 5 September 2017.

Let's promote her.' That has nothing to do with being a leader.”³⁹ Another master sergeant explained, “Unfortunately, the Marine Corps still promotes people based off of how they look on paper because they run well, they shoot well, and because they basically fly under the radar and don't do anything outside the ordinary. ... eventually they still get promoted whether they have any type of leadership skills or not,”⁴⁰ resulting in “on paper Marine[s].”⁴¹

Marines discussed how this emphasis on numbers lessens the value of other aspects that they feel are important to see in their leaders. Job competence is one such area. A sergeant in Twentynine Palms, talking about one individual, reported,

Your MOS is ... mechanic. You work on trucks. Your job is to read orders, differentiate and apply process, to raise equipment readiness. This man could not do that to save his life, but he had a good PFT, good CFT, shot decent on the range, showed up to work on time, uniform looked decent, made weight, and his boss doesn't know our job, that Marine will get promoted quicker than a technical expert in a technical community.⁴²

Others thought that even the combination of job performance and the numbers were not enough to ensure good leaders.

I think a lot of people focus on the tangible things like you've said, PFT, CFT, rifle score, proficiency in their job. “Well, this guy's great. He knows how to do dis and ass⁴³ the machine gun in this much time.” But ... that's not all of it. There's a lot of intangible things, like the attitude that [1st Lt] B⁴⁴ was talking about, the values that [2nd Lt] F was talking about. Is this person responsible? Can you trust this person when you're not around? ... To me, that's more important than the PFT and the CFT, is this person's attitude and how they are in their dealings with not only the younger Marines but also their seniors, too.⁴⁵

Others also spoke of the importance of other intangibles absent in the promotion process, such as interpersonal skills, listening skills, and humility. One captain, commenting on what makes leaders more receptive to other ideas, noted, “Humility ... And that is, unfortunately, a character trait that they don't screen for on promotion panels. Humility is probably the number one essential component of good leadership, one of the most important because no one has all the answers.”⁴⁶ A lieutenant colonel explained, “so the point is the character issues that make a good Marine or a good leader— to me, those aren't measured in a tangible way, other than a Section I in a fitness report, which hopefully captures it. Most people don't want to say it because we have a whole other problem with evaluating performance on paper, right?”⁴⁷

³⁹ Participant #230, Captain, Interview, MCAS Yuma, 25 September 2017.

⁴⁰ Participant #641, Master Sergeant, Interview, MCAS Yuma, 27 September 2017.

⁴¹ Participant #303, Major, Interview, MCB Quantico, 7 September 2017.

⁴² Participant #219, Sergeant, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 18 September 2017.

⁴³ Disassemble and assemble.

⁴⁴ Focus group participants each received a placard with a unique letter on it. Participants were asked to reference that letter instead of using the individual's name when talking to or about the individual to protect participant identity.

⁴⁵ Participant #036, Lieutenant, Focus Group, MCB Camp Lejeune, 22 August 2017.

⁴⁶ Participant #015, Captain, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 22 August 2017.

⁴⁷ Participant #008, Lieutenant Colonel, Focus Group, MCB Quantico, 16 August 2017.

Limitations of the Tools

As the lieutenant colonel mentioned above, it is hard to evaluate performance and leadership capability on paper. Several Marines discussed the problems they had with the tools available to ensure promotion of quality Marines. For example, the fitness report – the tool used to evaluate sergeants and above – and pros and cons – the tool for the junior enlisted – figured prominently in the discussion. A master sergeant at MCB Camp Pendleton explained,

This is such a leadership-centric organization and so small– I definitely would hesitate to lean toward the technical stuff when it comes to promotion, and progression, and retention. But when you say Marine Corps standard, I think that's what gets us in trouble because they try to standardize and measure every little nitnoid detail of performance. And sometimes those measurements [*laughing*] don't add up, like ‘what you’re talking about?’ [*sighs*] I don’t know. It's tough to measure people, and the measurements we have are off. Like FITREPs⁴⁸. That's one measurement of people that doesn't work a lot of times. When you have measurements of peoples’, like I don’t know, pro and con⁴⁹ marks for younger Marines, I don't know if it's the best measurement. It's a hard thing to do. It’s necessary, but I see it fail a lot.⁵⁰

In a male officer focus group at MCB Camp Butler, the participants discussed their frustration in not being able to truly represent the whole Marine concept in the fitness report.

*1st Lt O:*⁵¹ Our FITREP system is designed so that you are not allowed to say a negative thing whatsoever. And it's very frustrating. It can't even have implications of something negative. Otherwise, the entire report is adverse. ... For whatever reason, we've curtailed ourselves in the FITREP system to not allow for an honest and true evaluation without– it's either all or nothing. So, we've created this single point of failure or no-fault mentality in our FITREP system. So even if, a guy is lackluster or mediocre, so long as he doesn't do anything that's going to violate some sort of UCMJ⁵² article ... you're essentially going to continue to promote just fine ...

*1st Lt P:*⁵³ ... He could be an absolutely stellar person, a stellar Marine. Just a fucking jerk! And that creates a climate that nobody wants to work with. But I can't say that in my FITREP. I can't say that in my Section I⁵⁴ comments– “technically this is one of the most proficient Marines I've ever seen, but nobody wants to work for him because–”

1st Lt O: [*interrupting*] he has no interpersonal skills.

A captain at MCB Camp Pendleton captured this in a nutshell. Synopsizing the book *Bleeding Talent*, she explained, the book,

⁴⁸ Fitness report.

⁴⁹ Proficiency and conduct marks.

⁵⁰ Participant #119, Master Sergeant, Focus Group, MCB Camp Pendleton, 13 September 2017.

⁵¹ Participant #423, 1st Lieutenant, Focus Group, MCB Camp Butler, 19 October 2017.

⁵² Uniform Code of Military Justice.

⁵³ Participant #424, 1st Lieutenant, Focus Group, MCB Camp Butler, 19 October 2017.

⁵⁴ Section I is part of the fitness report.

talks about the promotion system in the Marine Corps specifically towards officers, that it doesn't promote based on merit. It promotes based on just you decided to stay in and you didn't get in trouble, and I think ... unfortunately a lot of Marine officers that stay in ... fit in that bubble. They stay in because it's easy, it's easy for them to stay in.⁵⁵

Others discussed the absence of options for leaders to deal effectively with problem Marines or those who may be great performers but not ready or desiring to assume leadership responsibilities. For example, a chief warrant officer suggested that, while battalion commanders can recommend someone for forced separation, that is not enough, “[battalion commanders] don't really have – they have a recommendation – to kick somebody out. And I think that's one thing that battalion commanders should be able to do is say, ‘I need these people out’”⁵⁶ and then be able to remove them. A couple of Marines discussed how not having the option for a technical track kept promoting Marines who may have the skills the Corps needs but who should not be or do not want to be leading people. One Marine offered that having an Army-like option of the technical track would allow the Marine Corps to keep needed expertise and “foster so much proficiency and stop that guy ... from being in a leadership role that had no business being there in the first place, didn't even want it.”⁵⁷

Personnel Management Decisions and Policies

Marines discussed several personnel management decisions and policies that could allow for bad leaders to rise in rank. For example, the speed of promotions in the junior enlisted and the perceived negative impact that had on leadership quality and the working environment were topics that came up frequently. To address personnel gaps, the Marine Corps, or certain units or MOSs within, are or have been promoting Marines, especially in the junior enlisted ranks, much more quickly, and, as a result, Marines reported that leadership at the middle enlisted ranks is lacking in skill and quality. Two big reasons why fast promotion can lead to poor leadership, according to participants, are mental immaturity and lack of experience. Explained one master gunnery sergeant, “we don't have enough Marines to fill all our billets. So, the solution is, guess what? ... Promote. Promote faster. ... They're not getting the job experience. ... Not only– not just MOS [experience] but leadership. ... Just basic leadership, that drive me nuts– drives me nuts.”⁵⁸ A lance corporal agreed, “there [are] those Marines who just fly through the ranks. There [are] MOSs that have really low cutting scores. ... Those Marines don't have the maturity. They don't have the experience. They don't have that mental capacity I guess in a sense to really know how to be appropriate ... because they fly through the ranks and they don't get the really appropriate training. They are our leaders now.”⁵⁹

Additionally, other Marines talked about other personnel decisions that had an impact on retention of quality Marines. For example, the tattoo ruling. One sergeant explained,

⁵⁵ Participant #610, Captain, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 12 September 2017.

⁵⁶ Participant #017, Chief Warrant Officer, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 22 August 2017.

⁵⁷ Participant #118, 1st Sergeant, Focus Group, MCB Camp Pendleton, 13 September 2017.

⁵⁸ Participant #321, Master Gunnery Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Butler, 18 October 2017.

⁵⁹ Participant #060, Lance Corporal, Interview, MCAS Cherry Point, 24 August 2017.

the military was downsizing, and it was easier to push these guys out because they were in violation of whatever rule. ... And then the Marines that ... didn't have a tattoo but they were garbage Marines but they didn't have a tattoo so they got to stay in and promote and move up the ranks, and now the scumbag lance corporal is now the scumbag gunny.^{60,61}

A sergeant also discussed the negative impact personnel decisions during the drawn down – in this case middle management incentives to retire early – made on the aviation community.

People that should have been in the Marine Corps, still to this day, as senior leaders sharing their wartime experience and their expertise left. They took that money and left. And that left a hole in experience. And it also left a hole in rank structure. So then, we filled those empty billets with people that were less qualified. Because there is a five-year gap where that knowledge left. And we've got to fill it with, with ranks. And rank equals experience. But, it doesn't actually equal experience because we promote based on who runs fast and who shoots straight. Not who knows their damn job. Not who has the qualifications. ... We have a lack of senior leadership, and we aren't keeping our best people. That's going to lead to more inexperienced junior Marines being placed into positions they're not ready for, failing more, and aircrafts falling out of the sky more.⁶²

The Shrinking Pool of Quality Marines to Fill the Higher Ranks

Beyond the impact of what is emphasized during the promotion process and personnel management decisions and policies on the quality of Marine leaders, Marines discussed additional reasons why bad leaders may be present. The first is that the good Marines get out. A chief warrant officer 3 stated, “we have a lot of worthless idiots that should never have been afforded the opportunity to wear the uniform. And unfortunately, those are the idiots that stick around ... and they get promoted, and the awesome ones get out.”⁶³ According to Marines to whom we spoke, they choose to separate for various reasons, such as their expertise is highly valued in the civilian section or they experienced a bad leader. The chief warrant officer 3 recounted his peer's decision to separate.

She got her graduate studies done in a field that is in high demand. Not many people have that type of an education in it. And well, she has realized that, “Well, if I stick around in the Marine Corps, this is what...” basically, quoting her, she said, “[*name removed per human subjects protection protocol*], if I stick around in the Marine Corps, I'm gonna have to do whatever I have to do to please the Marine Corps and prepare myself for command, or I could just continue doing what I really want to do and enjoy and get paid a lot of money, cause we're in a high demand.” [*Laughter*] It's like, “No brainer there.” So again, ... I swear I would have thought [she] would make it to at least general rank– general officer rank but [she's] too good for it.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Participant #221, Sergeant, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 18 September 2017.

⁶¹ The research was conducted in the aftermath of a significant drawdown in personnel.

⁶² Participant #116, Sergeant, Focus Group, MCB Camp Pendleton, 13 September 2017.

⁶³ Participant #215, Chief Warrant Officer 3, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 13 September 2017.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

On the leadership front, one master sergeant offered, “You can treat a young ignorant kid like shit and tell them that this is all for a purpose. About the eight-year mark, they start to figure it out. This isn’t for me.”⁶⁵ And they separate. Further, sometimes, those who are staying in are there because of limited options. For example, a sergeant at MCB Camp Pendleton pointed out,

Some of the best Marines I've ever known, they get out. Because they succeed in the Marine Corps, and then they are going to succeed outside of it as well. And then, you also see not—definitely not all, but a *lot* of people that stay in because the Marine Corps is their only option. All they know is how to run, do pull-ups, and yell at people. So, they stay in. They eventually move higher and higher up the totem pole. So we've got all these 8999s ... that barely passed high school and all they know is to yell. And, that's the leadership that these junior men and women are seeing. And it turns them off because it's like, “well, I don't want to stay in for 20 years to end up like *that* guy.” Or “I don't want to stay in 18 more years and having to put up with that guy.”⁶⁶

Other Marines discussed the obstacles that good Marines face that can inhibit their ability to advance. Pregnancy and parenthood were such obstacles. One captain recounted a situation with a pregnant Marine who could not return to the rifle range to update her scores because of pregnancy, and that impacted her pros and cons.

I will share one story because this to this day bothers me very bad. I had a Marine. She came up to work in my section. She was on the rifle range, unq'ed, so didn't qualify, but in that same week, found out she was pregnant. So she was never able to go back. ... So we're talking about a year-ish she couldn't go back to the range. Every pros and cons she got this is... so pros and cons are out of a 5.0. She was getting 4.7s, 4.8s before she was pregnant. When she unq'ed on the range, she was getting like 3.9s. That's like very, very bad. ... She got that her entire time until she came up and worked for me. I'm talking about stellar Marine, great. She was the one who was a little chubby, and we worked on getting her back into standards. But, in regards to any Marine that I ever had with getting her work done and her job done, on point. On point. She was meritoriously promoted. I mean, this is the type of caliber this Marine was. But because she got pregnant and wasn't able to go back to the range, they're like ... I called the CO⁶⁷, talked [to] the CO. I talked to the IPAC⁶⁸ director. The only way that would have gotten changed is if I could change their minds. But they're like “no, 'cause this Marine qualified and she didn't.” But I was like “yeah, but there's more to a Marine than qualifying or not qualifying. What if this Marine qualified and is great on paper but is a crappy Marine?”⁶⁹

A corporal recounted, “We've had investigations about— a girl had to go pump every two hours, and so they tried to affect her pros and cons, which is strictly performance- and Marine Corps-based. Like, it shouldn't matter that she has to pump to feed her child.”⁷⁰ A major provided her personal experience.

⁶⁵ Participant #504, Master Sergeant, Interview, Pentagon, 7 September 2017.

⁶⁶ Participant #115, Sergeant, Focus Group, MCB Camp Pendleton, 13 September 2017.

⁶⁷ Commanding officer.

⁶⁸ Installation Personnel Administration Center.

⁶⁹ Participant #014, Captain, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 17 August 2017.

⁷⁰ Participant #040, Corporal, Focus Group, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

Having a C-section, I still – like I had my kids eight years ago – I still can't even do the crunches because it cut away my muscles. Like, I can't put those muscles back. There is no consideration. Am I a bad Marine because I can't do 105 crunches or 100 crunches? No. But I get penalized for it in my fitness report perhaps compared to my peers.⁷¹

Some are facing mandatory separation because of the time in rank restrictions, as a corporal explained. "I have seen a lot of good Marines get out because of the time in service, like 'you've been in at this rank for too long. It's time for you to go.' So ... especially, a lot of experience and a lot of good leaders are gone because of that,"⁷² which he attributed to lack of boat space, not qualifications or qualities. One major said that others face MOS biases in the institution. "There are MOSs, mine included, who have never had an 06 make it to the 07 level. ... There is no policy. It's just the way we've always done it."⁷³ A couple of Marines raised the issue of Marines' not being afforded the same opportunities as others due to timing or workload distribution. One sergeant discussed how Marines who are the "work horses" are kept back from opportunities because of unit need and those who are not as competent get the opportunities that reflect well in the promotion process.

A lot of the work horses and the Marines that have a lot of the experience ..., their book probably doesn't look the best. They probably didn't have the opportunity to go to a lot of the schools or a lot of the trainings that units get tasked with in sending people because, I don't know what's wrong with the culture of the Marine Corps and the culture of leadership, but ... when you're good at your job, there's two things that happen: Your job becomes the guy who sucks' job and also you do not get to go anywhere. "We need you because of your production." ... If you are a producer and you're a hard worker, you better expect to be doing your job for the next three years until your fingers break. "Ah, you need to go to professional military education? No. We don't need you to go to professional military education. We need vehicles put on the ready line. That's what we need. And those retards over there that can't get their job together, that can't fix anything? They got other things to go do like, we need guys to go PME school 'cause the 1st sergeant said so."⁷⁴

The Complicity of Leadership

As in the previous quotation, sometimes leadership has to make hard calls to ensure their mission is accomplished. While it is "mission first, people always," these sometimes conflict. Marines reported, however, there are times when leadership actions and choices are complicit in creating bad leaders or fostering an environment in which they can advance. For example, those who are bad leaders are teaching others how to lead. Several Marines pointed this out. One gunnery sergeant explained,

There are people that I observed that were positive influences and other people that I observed that were negative influences. Yes, it's everybody's mind how they take it. They can see that person that's a negative influence and say 'I don't want to be like that guy.' Or

⁷¹ Participant #201, Major, Focus Group, MCB Quantico, 06 September 2017.

⁷² Participant #420, Corporal, Interview, MCB Camp Butler, 18 October 2017.

⁷³ Participant #505, Major, Interview, Pentagon, 7 September 2017.

⁷⁴ Participant #219, Sergeant, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 18 September 2017.

they can look at that negative influence and say ‘well, if that's how he does it, that's how I'm going to do it.’ But that's up to the individual person.⁷⁵

Others noted how some leaders allow favoritism to cloud their judgments in the promotion process. “If you played basketball with the sergeant, you were put on a meritorious promotion board,”⁷⁶ explained one corporal. A major provided,

What I see is nepotism, favoritism. And nepotism, when I say nepotism, I mean, “hey, this guy is my good ole boy buddy from my previous unit, and well, I’m gonna pull him on board and he's going to progress ahead of everybody.” That's going on all the time. Nepotism, favoritism, granting unfair advantage to others. So, the symptoms of discrimination are there.⁷⁷

A sergeant gave the following example:

We had one dude, he should not have been promoted to NCO⁷⁸. Like, he’s a turd, but my gunny liked him. ... On our first deployment, my gunny was with him the whole time, and they built a good relationship, and they used to hang out after work every now and then. And so he did not get non-recommended for promotion when he should have been because he was boys with gunny, and everyone knew it.⁷⁹

A lieutenant colonel noted, with many exceptions, that “there are plenty [of leaders] that will teach ‘cover your ass’ leadership style, and it’s a promoted style.”⁸⁰ Marines discussed how leaders are just out for themselves, making decisions and judgments that will advance their careers.

This is the other cultural thing that I've learned about the Marine Corps. ... They tell us, “Do what you gotta do to take care of your Marines. Take care of your Marines, and then your career will come if it comes.” But in practice what actually happens is people kinda take care of their Marines, but they're always promoting their career progression and “Okay, how am I gonna get the next key billet in grade, and how am I gonna make myself competitive for battalion command?” And they, I think to a degree, we start losing sight of this being about service and taking care of the Marines beneath us because we're trying to avoid any negative attention on our unit in order to make sure that we do not get our chances of promotion impacted.⁸¹

Marines reported that this can lead to leaders’ not holding Marines accountable for bad actions or correcting behavior and just passing the problem on to other units. A lance corporal offered the following example: “There was one time that this gunny, he ... gets pulled over for DUI, gets arrested. ... Nothing comes of it. ... no repercussions. ... kept his rank, kept his job, and all they did was just transfer him units.”⁸² A captain explained when Marines do something wrong and need to be disciplined,

⁷⁵ Participant #038, Gunnery Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

⁷⁶ Participant #040, Corporal, Focus Group, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

⁷⁷ Participant #114, Major, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 12 September 2017.

⁷⁸ Non-commissioned officer.

⁷⁹ Participant #221, Sergeant, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 18 September 2017.

⁸⁰ Participant #618, Lieutenant Colonel, Focus Group, MCB Camp Pendleton, 18 September 2017.

⁸¹ Participant #700, Captain, Interview, MCB Quantico, 6 September 2017.

⁸² Participant #060, Lance Corporal, Interview, MCAS Cherry Point, 24 August 2017.

sometimes leaders fail to do the paperwork and documentation or the mentorship so they don't do their part. And I mean it's not like people join the Marine Corps to be administrators so a lot of times you get these meat eating people in positions and it's like, "hey, man, you're also a manager. You're also the Human Resources of this institution." ... [I]t does take some paperwork, and I mean, it's a bureaucracy.⁸³

Marines reported that some leaders do not counsel Marines because they are in a competitive or highly valued MOS. As one 1st lieutenant explained, when asked how bad Marines keep moving up in rank,

it was leaders' not taking the time to enforce standards or counsel them. And in some cases maybe they were a critical MOS. Like in comm, we have the data Marines, and they're a very much high demand MOS. So, ... if leaders aren't careful, those Marines might get away with more or get away with less, I should say. And I can think of some examples of that, ... people who can kinda get away with it based on their MOS.⁸⁴

Other Marines discussed the importance of mentoring and developing the next generation of leaders and how some leaders are failing in this. A sergeant discussed his experience upon arriving at a new unit. "Corporals are usually supposed to be counseled every three months, and junior Marines, like lance corporals and below, are usually counseled every one month. So when I got [to my unit], for the past two to three years, no counselings had been conducted. ... there's no development."⁸⁵ The 1st lieutenant from above stated,

I have seen a lot of leaders both officer and enlisted who don't seek to [develop and encourage their Marines to better themselves], who get complacent in their own jobs or maybe their duties keep them so busy, that focusing on developing junior Marines or Marines just junior to them doesn't get a lot of their time.⁸⁶

So why are there bad leaders?

As can be seen from the preceding discussion, there are many factors involved – institutional values, institutional processes and policies, and individual decisions and actions – and they are intertwined and very complex. There is no easy, quick answer. Despite the Marine Corps' strong reputation for focusing on leadership, this area may warrant deeper investigation because of the number and complexity of the institutional and individual impacts of bad leaders.

⁸³ Participant #016, Captain, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 22 August 2017.

⁸⁴ Participant #065, 1st Lieutenant, Interview, MCAS Cherry Point, 24 August 2017.

⁸⁵ Participant #615, Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 14 September 2017.

⁸⁶ Participant #065, 1st Lieutenant, Interview, MCAS Cherry Point, 24 August 2017.

The Benefits and Challenges of Being an Empathetic Leader

*I think that compassion is often overlooked as a trait that should be valued in our organization.*⁸⁷
~ Major, MCB Camp Butler

Empathy is the skill of being able to understand another's perspective, especially in regards to how they are feeling about an event or situation.⁸⁸ In this section, we have chosen to use the word empathy to encapsulate various elements related to the skill of being able to empathize. Not all Marines used the word empathy. Like the major quoted above, some talked about "compassion." Others discussed, for example, "getting to know your Marines" or "walking in someone else's shoes." We take these notions to be empathetic in nature. In what follows:

- 1) We look at empathy as a missing or undervalued core value, citing Marines who believe it should be a formally imparted leadership quality. We also acknowledge the potential challenges of espousing empathy in an organization that values stoicism.
- 2) We examine how empathy is a useful leadership tool. According to many Marines with whom we spoke, an empathetic leader garners trust and fosters cohesion.
- 3) Marines talk about their experiences having an empathetic leader – or an unempathetic one – and how these experiences have positively informed their own leadership styles and strengthened their trust in leadership and the Corps.
- 4) Marines discuss their own trials and errors as leaders to illustrate how maturity and experience are two factors that contribute to an empathetic leadership style.
- 5) We conclude by discussing the way that several Marines with whom we spoke reframed empathy as courageous, sometimes highlighting how female Marines in particular can be an asset in this regard.

Empathy as a Missing or Undervalued Core Value?

Some Marines noted the irony in suggesting that empathy would be good for the Marine Corps and its leadership.⁸⁹ After all, being in touch with emotions is perhaps one of the last things people associate with being a good Marine. As one Marine put it, "[T]he Marine Corps' not big on [empathy]. You know, it's *[imitating an angry Marine]*, 'Oh the Marine Corps, it's not time for empathy talk or anything like that.'"⁹⁰ Indeed, empathy can be tricky since it veers into dangerous emotional waters. Traditional ways of thinking can place anything pertaining to

⁸⁷ Participant #320, Major, Interview, MCB Camp Butler, 17 October 2017.

⁸⁸ Those who study empathy sometimes distinguish between different types of empathy. See, for example, Martha Raile Alligood, "Empathy: The Importance of Recognizing Two Types," *Journal of Psychosocial Nursing and Mental Health Services* 30, no. 3 (1992): 14-17. Here, we use the term broadly.

⁸⁹ Many also stressed that there was a fine line between getting to know their Marines and being their friends: "So I use the expression 'you can be friendly with your Marines.' There's nothing wrong with that. But ultimately if they – your Marines – if they're not the same rank of you, they're not your friends. So you still have the requirement to make decisions that might not be necessarily in the best interests of what they want, but it's in the best interest of the group as a whole." (Participant #214, Captain, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 12 September 2017.)

⁹⁰ Participant #125, 2nd Lieutenant, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 18 September 2017.

emotions in the “weak” bin, whereas stoicism is commonly seen as strong.⁹¹ Empathy, therefore, has a stigma to it, especially in an environment that so highly values traditional ideas of strength and masculinity. Additionally, Marines pride themselves on placing the mission above all else and letting nothing get in the way; emotions may sometimes be viewed as an impediment to this.

To be sure, several Marines were dubious of empathy and portrayed it to be an intrusion from wider society that had negatively impacted the Marines Corps in recent years. For instance, one warrant officer said, “Perhaps society is considering people’s feelings a lot more [*chuckles*] empathetically. And this organization is being affected by that. I mean if you want to talk transgender or consider people’s feelings. That didn’t exist ten years ago.”⁹² He continued, “[T]hey used to be able to hold a Marine accountable for doing something. Now, we need to consider the backstory and his feelings and all the circumstances in his personal life surrounding that situation.”⁹³ Sometimes this sentiment was tied to millennials and the perception that they are different from older generations. A gunnery sergeant said, “It’s a softer generation. [*imitating a millennial*] ‘My feelings are hurt.’”⁹⁴ But it must also be noted that those who made a point to target empathy as an unwanted incursion would sometimes talk about how empathetic characteristics were good for leadership. For example, a chief warrant officer 3 who lamented the “kinder, gentler military garbage” also believed that a good leader “always takes care of his Marines. ... We need to build each other up as far as education. As far as what their goals are, what their personal goals are, what their professional goals are, short, mid-term and long term.”⁹⁵ To draw attention to this dissonance is not to invalidate the opinions of these participants, but instead to highlight the complexity of thought surrounding empathy.

For some, the difference between empathy and being too sensitive was obvious. One major distinguished empathy from being “touchy-feely” and viewed the former as a tool for perspective-taking. He believed that empathy was so important that it should be a leadership characteristic in JJDITIEBUCKLE⁹⁶, saying, “I would take out one of those Es and add empathy. Empathy is a thing that allows you to see things from other people's perspectives. It's not a touchy-feely thing where we have to give a shit about people's feelings and hug them and make sure they don't ever get hurt.”⁹⁷ Echoing the notion that empathy should be a codified leadership characteristic, a major said during a focus group,

JJDITIEBUCKLE is really good, but we don’t ever talk about empathy, humility in anything. I think empathy is used one time in *Leading Marines* ... and maybe *Sustaining the Transformation*, but it’s not a core value, it’s not a leadership trait, it’s not a leadership

⁹¹ Michele A. Bowring, “Resistance Is *Not* Futile: Liberating Captain Janeway from the Masculine-Feminine Dualism of Leadership,” *Gender, Work, & Organization* 11, no. 2 (July 2004): 381-405.

⁹² Participant #023, Warrant Officer, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 22 August 2017.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Participant #144, Gunnery Sergeant, Interview, MCAS Yuma, 27 September 2017.

⁹⁵ Participant #215, Chief Warrant Officer 3, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 13 September 2017.

⁹⁶ The acronym used to capture the 14 Marine leadership characteristics: Judgment, Justice, Dependability, Integrity, Decisiveness, Tact, Initiative, Endurance, Bearing, Unselfishness, Courage, Knowledge, Loyalty, and Enthusiasm. For more information, see *RP 0103 – Principles of Marine Corps Leadership* on the Marine Corps’ Training and Education Command website.

⁹⁷ Participant #126, Major, Interview, MCAGCC Twentypalms Palms, 19 September 2017.

principle. ... Humility and empathy are huge if you want to re-trust the generational gap and have people be part of that team, and we don't teach it.⁹⁸

Alluding to the perception that men are less empathetic than women, she finished by saying, "That recommendation came from a male."⁹⁹ Another participant, acknowledging the stigma attached to empathy, talked about how being compassionate has helped him be a better leader, even if he has "never led Marines in the battle," explaining,

People have opinions about compassion because it's the attributed to, I guess, vulnerability and weakness. But vulnerability is not a weakness. I don't believe that. Us as officers are trained to be the example, the stoic rock that whenever someone is in trouble, that they can turn to us. ... We're supposed to be the beacon of light. Yeah, we are, but we're also human. I never led Marines in the battle. I don't know what that's like. But I've led Marines through difficult times in their lives when they attempted suicide, their family members have died, their own coworker just committed suicide, or someone just overdosed, her baby just died. Those are real life issues that I've dealt with my Marines.¹⁰⁰

Why is empathy a useful leadership tool?

Contradicting the idea that emotions impede effectiveness, many Marines to whom we spoke stressed how empathy can actually be *beneficial* to the mission of the Marine Corps. They looked at it from a practical day-to-day perspective, highlighting how empathy can make the workplace more cohesive and productive. One major explained how it can be useful when dealing with new people and situations. He gave the example of coming into a new unit and avoiding the impulse to judge the previous leadership, saying,

If you had empathy, if you were able to see things from another person's perspective, you might instead say, "They were solving *other* problems. They solved those problems, and now we're here so we're going to solve the problems that they weren't able to solve because they were dealing with this other shit instead."¹⁰¹

A captain used the word "compassionate" to describe his ideal Marine officer and talked about how an empathetic attitude in leadership is conducive to being able to more effectively lead your Marines, stating, "I think an empathetic leader and someone who is compassionate, empathetic can be able to relate to an individual. That's my opinion on how a Marine officer should be."¹⁰² He applied this attitude to leading millennials, suggesting that understanding where they are coming from makes it easier to lead them. This was an alternative perspective to the Marines who saw the millennials as deficient (as opposed to just *different*) and the gulf between them and older generations as insurmountable.

That's why I think Marines are more comfortable that way. We were leading a millennial generation. Instant gratification. Things need to happen now, now, now so to better understand that. Either pick up a book and read, get on social media, understand how they think work and operate, and you can be able to lead them better. Talk to them too.¹⁰³

⁹⁸ Participant #203, Major, Focus Group, MCB Quantico, 6 September 2017.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Participant #600, Captain, Interview, Pentagon, 6 September 17.

¹⁰¹ Participant #126, Major, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 19 September 2017.

¹⁰² Participant #600, Captain, Interview, Pentagon, 6 September 17.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

Beyond understanding from where their Marines are coming, one major talked about how “engaged” leaders have more of a chance to positively impact the way their Marines think. He explained how this is a potential way to foster trust in leadership and mitigate unrest or the influence of bad apples within the ranks.

It’s engage[d] leadership, but I keep going back over the years and different jobs and different leadership positions, I’ve constantly come back to that. ... [I]f you are talking to your Marines, you are creating and engendering that loyalty to you and that openness and stuff like that. They are also more likely to be receptive when you tell them something that perhaps goes against what their initial thoughts are on the subject. They’re more open and receptive to that. So, when you’re engaged at that level, you have a greater ability to impact Marines. You’re never gonna eliminate it all, right, but perhaps more of those marginal people you can bring on board.¹⁰⁴

A gunnery sergeant had a similar perspective. He talked about how being open with your Marines leads them to trust you in the times when you *cannot* be open with them: “They’re going to know, ‘Hey you know Gunny usually gives us the why. This must be extremely important for him not to be able to explain why we’re doing this.’”¹⁰⁵

Examples of Empathy in Leadership

In talking about good leadership, many Marines brought up examples of empathetic leaders they have had and the way that these examples either instilled in them confidence in the Marine Corps or taught them how to be a better leader. In general, it seemed that empathetic leadership styles stood out to participants not only because they went against the grain but also because they were effective. In the 2nd lieutenant’s story below, the gunnery sergeant displays empathy in encouraging an Officer Candidate School candidate through using a bit of knowledge about the candidate’s past. Instead of yelling at the candidate because she consistently could not keep up, the gunnery sergeant took a different approach.

[W]e had one candidate who was struggling, just struggling physically, academically, leadership wise. It kind of made some people in our squad who don’t know about the games of ... boot camp and things like that, like they try to mess with you, and then they try to see who turns on each other. ... And so there are people turning on her, and we were out for a particular run, and this gunnery sergeant— this girl was falling back, this was like [the] third run this week and she's falling back, falling back, falling back. And instead of just laying into her like all the other gunnery sergeants and our officers were doing, this gunnery sergeant turned around, slowed down the whole squad, turned around and started looping, like loop back and got her and had her lead and like kept getting her. Every time she'd fall back, she'd make all of us run with her and make all of us get her to go. ... It was the first time I'd ever heard a sergeant instructor say anything positive to anyone and was like, “Come on, you played basketball in college. This is all mental. You can do this,” and like started motivating her. To me, that was really awesome because it could be so easy.¹⁰⁶

Moreover, in the story above, the gunnery sergeant set an example that bucked the trend to hassle and “turn on” those who fall behind. This is illustrative of how leadership can influence and

¹⁰⁴ Participant #068, Major, Interview, MCAS Cherry Point, 24 August 2017.

¹⁰⁵ Participant #612, Gunnery Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 13 September 2017.

¹⁰⁶ Participant #125, 2nd Lieutenant, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 18 September 2017.

create certain environments through their leadership style. The 2nd lieutenant above captured the influence of current leaders on future leaders when she said, “And so then because ma’am, sir did it or someone above them did it, that we are supposed to respect so much, now it’s okay. Now it’s okay to do that.”¹⁰⁷

A gunnery sergeant articulated how he sees taking care of his Marines as paramount to being a good leader in the Marines Corps but suggested that this position was not shared by all. He talked about a negative experience with his leadership that strengthened his resolve to be there for his Marines.

I had a captain and a major once tell me – and it was the most offensive thing I have ever been told by a leader – is that I am too quick to fall on my sword for my subordinates. And it made me sick to my stomach because I wear these chevrons for the benefit of my subordinates. If I don’t take care of my people and empower my people and have the backs of my people and stand up for them when they need me to, I shouldn’t be in this rank, and I shouldn’t be in this institution.¹⁰⁸

Echoing this notion from the side of the subordinate, a sergeant articulated why empathy in leadership was important, using the example of the “tourniquet test.” He said,

[T]hat’s a question every junior Marine in the infantry is gonna ask himself whether they admit it or not. It’s like ... “I don’t know if I’m gonna to put a tourniquet on that dude.” Obviously, in that situation, they would. But when they think about it like, “That dude treats me like garbage, would I really want to save that guy’s life?”¹⁰⁹

Empathy and Experience

In addition to the example that leadership sets, participants emphasized that experience and age were important factors in attaining an empathic leadership style. However, as discussed in the preceding sub-section on the promotion process, young Marines, especially on the enlisted side, often become leaders before they have developed the emotional maturity necessary for enacting empathy. A captain had this to say about his own experience in growing and maturing emotionally as a leader. “I think my earlier years, as a younger leader, I was less forgiving of certain attributes that people– or qualities that Marines didn’t have, rather than seeing it as an opportunity to develop those skills.”¹¹⁰

Others suggested that empathy is tied to cultural norms that are either conducive to fostering this characteristic or, alternatively, conducive to portraying it as a weakness. Marines talked about taking on an aggressive style of leadership because it was the norm. For instance, discussing how she emulated her drill instructors’ leadership style as a young SNCO, a master gunnery sergeant recounted how her yelling had “absolutely zero effect” on her Marines as a young leader. She noted, “So, even though that sounds super hypocritical and it absolutely is because those were the things I despised from my drill instructor, I did it. It’s a learned behavior through the

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Participant #046, Gunnery Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

¹⁰⁹ Participant #221, Sergeant, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 18 September 2017.

¹¹⁰ Participant #056, Captain, Focus Group, MCAS Cherry Point, 24 August 2017.

culture.”¹¹¹ Similarly, a female lieutenant colonel talked about how she “was part of the problem” because she did not question the cultural norms of the Marine Corps. That changed, however, when she had an experience (motherhood) that put her in the shoes of the Marines to whom she once, in her view, did wrong:

[U]p until the time that I became a mother as a lieutenant colonel with sixteen years of service, I had no idea what the challenges were for pregnant service women and also for new mothers. And I'm ashamed to admit that I was part of the problem because I completely accepted the Marine Corps' cultural norm on face value and did what I thought was appropriate as a supervisor, which was to hold my females accountable the same way I'd hold men accountable. And so, no, I was not inclined to give any sort of accommodation. I wanted the doctor's note for everything. I was awful, I was absolutely awful. And after I became a mother where I could find them, I sent emails to the women who I had been a supervisor of and I apologized to them because it was— I was perpetuating a system that is not very accommodating. ... But I did, because that's what was expected. And in fact, my bosses, men, expected me to do that, and I didn't see anything wrong with it.¹¹²

By bringing up how she felt she was doing the right thing by holding “females accountable the same way I'd hold men accountable,” the lieutenant colonel touched on the problem of equality versus equity. Many participants understood equality to mean “the same, for everyone,” while in the same breath acknowledging that people were different and had different needs and experiences.¹¹³ A captain highlighted this distinction during a focus group.

I know that I've been through things that are very specific to being female. And then I know that my friends have gone through things that are very similar, and that we have struggled differently, solely based on gender. And I think that, as a culture, or as a Marine Corps, there is this perception that, if we look at everyone like they're equal, then they'll just be equal, which is just false. It's not true. It's a terrible way to look at the problem. And I think it lacks the empathy ... we were talking about earlier to address the issues and solve them.¹¹⁴

At the end of this quotation, the captain relates the problem back to empathy and a lack of understanding for the ways that people are different. As an organization that is largely comprised of men, many formal and informal standards in the Marine Corps are geared more toward men and their capabilities and experiences. Therefore, the presence of more female Marines and leaders might shift cultural norms.

In a female officer focus group in Quantico, this notion manifested when the discussion turned to how the lack of female presence in many units makes empathy difficult, especially in dealing with challenges that are specific to being a woman, such as pregnancy, and in knowing the work-life options available to them. An officer stated that she “plant(s) the seed” in her Marines who might not have faced these challenges yet or who may not think it is possible to be both married and a Marine or a mother and a Marine, so that they will not “just leave because they've never seen it” within their units.

¹¹¹ Participant #263, Master Gunnery Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Butler, 17 October 2017.

¹¹² Participant #603, Lieutenant Colonel, Interview, Pentagon, 6 September 2017.

¹¹³ Tailoring expectations to these differences would fall under “equity,” a concept about which Marines expressed mixed feelings.

¹¹⁴ Participant #058, Captain, Focus Group, MCAS Cherry Point, 24 August 2017.

[I]t is only because I became a mother and a spouse that I became more empathetic, so I think that you have to plant the seed in the lieutenants because when they're in that company grade, will eat each other alive because they don't— but if there's no female major, married in a unit, they will never know, and they just leave because they've never seen it.¹¹⁵

Reframing Empathy as Courage

Empathy would need to be reframed to be seen as a strength, especially in an organization that values stoicism and physical strength. One major's remarks highlighted how Marines' focus on warfighting might cause the idea of empathy to be met with resistance. However, she reframed the issue when she “zoom[ed] out” and talked about the broader mission of the Marine Corps. Although she understands that the job of Marines is to fight wars, she argued that warfighting is not the totality of the mission nor the end goal.

[O]ur job is to fight wars, but we also have a lot of missions that aren't fighting wars. We have humanitarian missions. We have security cooperation missions, which are usually training for fighting wars, but there's other elements to it too. ... We have an attitude that Marines are killers and warfighters, it's common. ... When I have said that we are missing the point when we want to say that we are warfighters and that's all that we are. Because we should all be trying to work ourselves out of a job, every single day. The purpose of the military is fight wars. The purpose of fighting wars is to not fight wars. It is to make the world a more secure place.¹¹⁶

Another participant discussed how empathy is often more difficult because it entails going against the masses, and because of this, it can be seen as a courageous move.

[Y]ou have to be able to step in and do the right thing at the right times. And we teach that, but ... it takes real courage to be able to do that. You know, when all your buddies are sitting there saying like, “Oh yeah fuckin' Seahawks suck,” you would be a Seahawks fan and be like, “No, they don't, actually have one the better defenses.” *[laughter]* It's tough when the whole crowd is going against it, but I think that's what it takes. I don't know what kind of training that is. You can't simply put it, “Oh, empathy training,” because Marine Corps can look at that and be like, “Oh my God, we're gonna lose. We're gonna lose to the frickin' British cheerleading team.” I don't know *[laughter]* whatever you want to think of. We're going to lose because we're talking about empathy but ... I think it's just as courageous to stand up in those moments than it is to frickin' go out there and put your life on the line because sometimes you are putting your life on the line doing that.¹¹⁷

Further, while scholars who study gender are not in agreement about whether women are more empathetic by nature or by nurture, many people perceive women to be more attuned to their own emotions and the emotions of others. Several of the Marines with whom we spoke noted this and related it to the argument that women are an asset to the Marine Corps because of their capacity for empathy. For example, one focus group participant said, “[O]ne of the better leaders

¹¹⁵ Participant #203, Major, Focus Group, MCB Quantico, 6 September 2017.

¹¹⁶ Participant #320, Major, Interview, MCB Camp Butler, 17 October 2017.

¹¹⁷ Participant #125, 2nd Lieutenant, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 18 September 2017.

I worked for, and he was really upfront, he said, ‘I don’t really work with a lot of women.’ He’s like, ‘I struggle with empathy. Maybe you can help me balance that.’ He saw the value that I guess maybe my gender brought.”¹¹⁸ A master sergeant, whose wife is also a Marine, talked about how female Marines tend to temper their empathy because of the perception that women are already too soft and emotional, while, from his perspective, male Marines do just the opposite and become more empathetic. Emblematic of an empathetic leader himself, the master sergeant and his wife attend marriage counseling not only for them but also to figure out how couples work so that they can be better leaders. He recounted the following observation after they were administered a counseling test about empathy.

[F]emales in the Marine Corps do not have room for empathy. They don't have time for it. They could understand, alright? They can align with you. They can even try to understand what it is that you're going through, but they didn't have that luxury. No one was empathetic for them. No one gave a crap if the daycare opened 6:00 and PT¹¹⁹ was at 6:00. [*imitating an unempathetic Marine*] “You figure it the hell out. ... Suck it up, figure it out or get a nanny or you get somebody drop off the kid for you or something, but it's not the Marine Corps’ fault. The Marine Corps didn’t issue you a kid, alright?” So I think female Marines are way less empathetic than males, and if they are empathetic – which is okay to be empathetic, right? – then it's seen as a weakness. So there's like this double standard that falls in there.¹²⁰

He concluded by saying that women’s empathy is a huge asset to the Marine Corps, stating, “[T]hey bring a huge dynamic to the Marine Corps. If we took all the female Marines out of the Marine Corps, I don’t think we would accomplish the mission. Honestly, I don’t.”¹²¹

A Note about Empathy and Time

It must be noted that, according to participants, being an empathetic and engaged leader involves time and emotional energy. Some of the Marines who extolled the virtues of empathy also brought up the fact that being an engaged leader was almost like having another job, one for which that they were not trained. Additionally, some talked about the emotional toll that being invested in the lives and wellbeing of their Marines can take. These are additional factors and challenges to consider in regards to empathetic leadership.

¹¹⁸ Participant #203, Major, Focus Group, MCB Quantico, 6 September 2017.

¹¹⁹ Physical training.

¹²⁰ Participant #200, Master Sergeant, Interview, MCB Quantico, 6 September 2017.

¹²¹ Ibid.

PART III: The Procedural and Social Uses of PFT/CFT Scores

As expected, Marines to whom we spoke had much to say on the topic of physical fitness. While all Marines saw the value of high levels of fitness, there were many different opinions about how fit Marines should be and the perceived inequalities in how Marines are measured physically against one another. Marines raised concerns about how the extreme emphasis that some Marines put on fitness, especially pull-ups, may overshadow other more important factors in what makes a Marine valuable to the Marine Corps. While not a comprehensive overview of all that was said on the topic, these prominent points of contention represent potential barriers to Marine cohesion. The divergent viewpoints likely arise from varying interpretations and partial misunderstanding of actual Marine Corps policy and the intent behind it. Complex as the arguments on all sides are, some Marines believe that much of this could be rectified through transparent and purposeful messaging on the practical value of a more diverse and less divided Marine Corps.

- 1) **The Primacy of Pull-Ups:** Participants often focused on pull-ups as the best measure of a Marine's value and worth, sometimes ignoring other important aspects of what makes a Marine valuable to the Marine Corps.
- 2) **Perceptions of Inequality:** Many of our male participants perceived the different physical standards (especially regarding pull-ups) between men and women as an inequality that negatively impacted male Marine careers.
- 3) **Fitness: Absolute or Relative?** Many Marines spoke of the PFT as a measurement of a Marine's *absolute* physical capability, while others emphasized that it is meant to be a *relative* measure of an individual Marine's fitness and that job competence matters more than or as much as absolute physical ability.
- 4) **Missed Messaging Opportunities:** Many of these issues could be solved with purposeful, transparent messaging on the purpose of the PFT/CFT in relation to other new MOS-specific gender neutral physical standards as well as an honest discussion on how Marines with diverse experiences will help the Marine Corps adapt to unpredictable future environments.

The Marines who participated in this research had much to say on the topic of physical fitness. Marines expressed a variety of ideas, and in their discussions, two important themes were very often present: the idea that the value of an individual Marine is directly tied to their ability to perform on the PFT, in particular pull-ups, and the thought that women have an unfair advantage in how their PFT is scored.

The Primacy of Pull-Ups

Pull-ups figured prominently in the data and were routinely what Marines referenced when discussing physical standards, a Marine's value, and physical readiness. The way in which many of the male Marines spoke of female Marines and physical fitness suggests that women's value as a Marine is tied directly to their ability to do pull-ups. While other PFT and CFT events were

mentioned, it was almost always specifically pull-ups that the participants discussed. A private first class (PFC) said, “I feel like to be taken seriously by other Marines and also to just be combat ready themselves, I feel like they should be able to perform better or more than nine pull-ups, ten pull-ups.”¹²²

It is interesting that many of the men chose to talk about pull-ups also as an indicator of a Marine’s preparedness for ground combat roles rather than other quantitative metrics such as the ability to shoot well or perform on the CFT, both of which are arguably more important skillsets in a firefight than pull-ups. A sergeant at MCB Camp Lejeune said,

It’s a standards thing when it comes to that. ... I don’t want it to be a he-man woman hating club right now. But– I have no problem with females being in combat. I have no problem being next to a woman in a firefight. I really don’t care. If she can pull her weight. And she’d better be able to pull the same amount of weight that I can pull and she’d better be able to meet every standard that I’ve had to meet. Whether that’s to get a first-class PFT I have to do 23 pull-ups. She has to do nine. There is a gap there ... that’s inequality. Everybody preaches equality, but then you say, “Well, they only have to do nine pull-ups.” You’re saying they are inherently weaker. By saying off the bat that somebody is inherently weaker, even if it’s true, you’re saying that there’s this inequality here. If you want someone to be treated equal, treat them equal.¹²³

He later continued,

If it’s only the female who can do the 28 pull-ups, then that’s what it should be. It shouldn’t be– we pander to “well, this female can do nine pull-ups. ... She’s got a 300 PFT as a female.” That’s not good enough. You look at a man in a combat MOS, in any MOS, you look at a man who does nine pull-ups and you are going to be like, “You need to step it up man. That’s not going to cut it.”¹²⁴

This “step it up, man” approach can have the opposite intended effect when applied to women who have never before been asked to do pull-ups. A female gunnery sergeant at MCAS Yuma challenged a male peer’s negativity about her shortcomings on the pull-up front in the following way:

This is why I love this job. I’m constantly educating people. Constantly try to– “okay, let’s look at it from a different perspective. I am different than you. Yes, maybe I’m struggling doing these pull-ups, right? Because that’s the main thing right now. I cannot do the pull ups. I’m struggling with it, at least I’m telling you that I need help. I’m coming to you because you’ve been doing pull-ups for this many times. Now you are belittling me and bringing me down because I cannot do pull-ups. The difference between my weakness and your weakness is that my weakness is exposed. I cannot fake it. [pause] You can. You can fake motivation. You can fake leadership. You can fake that you looking busy but you literally you haven’t accomplished nothing that day. You can fake all of that. But you cannot fake physical fitness.”¹²⁵

Her experience suggests that all this talk of pull-ups offers a very narrow perception of what makes a good Marine in some cases. Her desire to perform well on pull-ups is no different than

¹²² Participant #039, Private First Class, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

¹²³ Participant #026, Sergeant, Focus Group, MCB Camp Lejeune, 22 August 2017.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Participant #136, Gunnery Sergeant, Interview, MCAS Yuma, 25 September 2017.

the desire of any Marine to perform well, but the importance that other Marines place on pull-ups skylines her weakness. This illustrates the potential problems that can arise when emphasizing one physical exercise over other useful skills and attributes that Marines could bring to the table. A master gunnery sergeant with over two decades of experience spoke of feeling devalued and forced out of the Marine Corps because she is suddenly being asked to do something that her body was never trained to do. She recounted her reaction after the news broke of the new women's PFT standards that included pull-ups. When she called the phone number associated with the announcement about the new PFT rules, she spoke with a lieutenant colonel involved with the initiative to explain her grievances. He told her, "You know what? You can do it. It's been proven," to which the master gunnery sergeant replied,

"You proved it on younger women. You didn't prove it on me." And he was like, "Well, you just gotta get in the gym some more" And I was like, "Okay, you telling me that the lance corporal, the corporal female that works in the warehouse that is getting oppressed because she's got to go ahead and do this inventory and that inventory is going to be allotted three hours a day to go to the gym to build this muscle to be able to pull these pull-ups off?" "Well, if she wanted to be somebody."

The master gunnery sergeant went on to sum up her take on the matter,

But you're forcing me, all this experience and knowledge, out of the Marine Corps 'cause you're saying that [if] I can't perform this, then I'm no good. And it's still to this day, if I can't perform to this physical standard, all this experience and knowledge, you're no good. You're no good. Get out, you know?¹²⁶

This sentiment applies not only to female Marines but also to any Marines who do not align with the traditional idea of the extremely fit Marine who can run three miles in 18 minutes and do 20+ pull-ups. A female corporal at MCB Camp Pendleton discussed her experiences in which her worth and that of the Marines around her were defined by PFT and CFT performance.

If you have a bad PFT or CFT, then you are garbage. And then if you have all the same PFT, CFT, let's look at rifle scores, then it just goes down the list. But we have great Marines that can do all those things, maybe not so well, but are really good at their jobs. And I feel like they get ignored a lot. And those people are getting out.¹²⁷

At a MCAGCC Twentynine Palms focus group of male and female officers, one captain recalled this attitude leading to the loss of important personnel and their unique capabilities.

On the cyber aspect, I brought this up in front of the Commandant of the Marine Corps. As a former data Marine, I was an 0651 when I was enlisted, and there were a ton of Marines who could set up a network like nobody's business, right? Like super smart, we paid a ton of money to train these guys over there at MCCSS. They were bad Marines 'cause they ran 26-minute three miles and only did five pull-ups, so we told them they were bad Marines. But now they make six figures for Microsoft, and I was a platoon sergeant because I was terrible at my MOS. I hated computers, I hated setting up networks, but I could run fast, and I could do pull-ups. So the Marine Corps retained me, but all my peers who were in the air conditioning setting up the computer networking systems, they all make six figures

¹²⁶ Participant #263, Master Gunnery Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Butler, 17 October 2017.

¹²⁷ Participant #309, Corporal, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 14 September 2017.

a year now, and we don't have any of them for our future cyber fight for the Marine Corps.¹²⁸

Perceptions of Inequality

The difference in standards also struck many of the male participants as a clear case of cognitive dissonance on the part of the Marine Corps. The idea that female Marines can do fewer pull-ups and still get an equal score to their male counterparts did not sit well with them. One sergeant at MCB Camp Lejeune brought this up as soon as the conversation turned to the topic of gender discrimination. He had brought with him to the interview a slide from a TECOM PowerPoint that defined discrimination as “Treatment or consideration based on class or category rather than individual merit. Overt, direct, intentional, hidden, indirect, unintentional. Institution discrimination. Any systematic or functional practices that discriminate or manifest unequal treatment.”¹²⁹ He also brought along print-outs from an online PFT score calculator. He made the point that, while a man with 15 pull-ups, 150 crunches, and a 22-minute run scored a 256, a woman with the exact numbers would score a 294. It was his belief that a lot of the negative attitudes toward women in the Marine Corps were rooted in this perceived inequality.

This [*referring to printed PFT calculator*] says 15 pull-ups. The female has 15 pull-ups as well. She could do, I think, 8 and still get 100 points. Now PFT and CFT, that is factored into both promotion and retention. Promotion and retention are money. That's money, career, that's your life. It's important to Marines, especially for junior ranks who want to get out of the junior ranks.¹³⁰

This concern of different PFT numbers' causing high-performing male Marines to miss out on promotion opportunities came up frequently, as it did in a mixed gender officer focus group at MCAGCC Twentynine Palms.

I think that when you have a male Marine that gets a 300 PFT or say a male Marine that doesn't get a 300 PFT, he gets a 298 or something like that, he outruns and outperforms a female who gets a 300, and she gets meritoriously promoted, and he doesn't because all other things were equal? That's not engendering cohesion, it's not engendering respect, it's not engendering any of those things that we want to do, and I think we need to look at that. I don't know what the right answer is, but I think that when we have two standards, that's an issue.¹³¹

A gunnery sergeant at MCB Camp Lejeune said,

Just like the PFT standards. I don't know if that question will come up, but are they equal? Are they required to meet equal physical standards? No, it doesn't take a scientist to study that. They need to do this many pull-ups, and I need to do this many. Is that equal? No. Four and four is equal. 20 and 20 is equal. That's equal. So either we're equal, or we're not.

¹²⁸ Participant #621, Captain, Focus Group, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 18 September 2017.

¹²⁹ Participant #049, Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Participant #618, Lieutenant Colonel, Focus Group, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 18 September 2018.

I just, I hate that we try to act like they are, and we're trying to push for equal standards, but we don't.¹³²

A male SNCO focus group at MCAS Cherry Point covered the same topic in the same way.

*SSgt E:*¹³³ The male and female Marine are not held to the same physical standard, and it starts at the minimum level that a lot of people don't even necessarily notice. So a female Marine has to do one pull-up for 70 points. A male Marine has to do five pull-ups for 40, 60 points, something like that.

*SSgt D:*¹³⁴ 50 something.

SSgt E: 50 something. It's like a 22-point difference on the minimum. That's huge. There's already a three-minute gap on the minimum time, on the maximum time, so you have a less physical person getting the same score.

*GySgt F:*¹³⁵ If not better.

SSgt E: Or if not better than a person that was working ten times as hard.

SSgt D: Especially when they preach equality so much to these junior Marines.

SSgt E: Yeah, but it's not, and my Marines are smart. ... You can't tell them like, "Hey, look, this is fair." No, it's not.

Male Marines often expressed their distaste for what they saw as an overall devaluing of the Marine Corps based on their perception that female Marines have a much easier PFT. A male PFC at MCB Camp Lejeune talked about how the high standards of the Marine Corps are what set it apart from the other services. Even though he is not in a ground combat MOS, he feels that being held to high fitness standards and marksmanship standards makes him better at his regular job and instills a sense of pride that even though he is not kicking in doors and conducting combat patrols, he feels that he could if he needed to. However, that pride is affected by being around other Marines who have different standards. When asked if doing nine pull-ups or fewer takes away from that pride, the PFC responded, "I feel like it does. I feel like it does."¹³⁶

At times, some of the male Marines became angry when discussing the idea of gender equality in the Marine Corps while there are two different physical standards. This anger over different standards feeds into other gendered issues, such as the social ostracization of women and the type of online harassment that led to the Marines United incident. A staff sergeant in an all-male SNCO focus group at MCB Camp Lejeune expressed,

I just want to go back to what we were just talking about, the reason I'm here, gender equality. I did a class for my EOR¹³⁷ every 12 months about the six [*unintelligible*] things that you can be discriminated against, whatever age, race, color, creed, I'm sure you know. Gender. We're not equal with females. I do seven pull-ups, I get like 40 points. A female does seven pull-ups, they get 100 points. Until they're actually equal, they're not going to be socially accepted, and I'm going to treat them like a sandwich maker, and I'm going to turn a blind eye to pictures of them on the Internet because they're not equal. That's me.

¹³² Participant #054, Gunnery Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

¹³³ Participant #063, Staff Sergeant, Focus Group, MCAS Cherry Point, 24 August 2017.

¹³⁴ Participant #064, Staff Sergeant, Focus Group, MCAS Cherry Point, 24 August 2017.

¹³⁵ Participant #062, Gunnery Sergeant, Focus Group, MCAS Cherry Point, 24 August 2017.

¹³⁶ Participant #039, Private First Class, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

¹³⁷ Equal opportunity representative.

I'm not going to put the pictures up, but I will turn a blind eye to it because they're not equal. And if a female gets pregnant and they take 15 months off of being a Marine because they're on limited duty, how am I going to treat you equal if I get ten days of freaking PTAD [*time off*] once my wife pops out a kid? I can't spend that time. Nothing equal about it. So to socially accept females, you can't have them just meet the minimum standard of five pull-ups to join the infantry. They got to be actually equal just like everything else. If anybody disagrees, please let me know.¹³⁸

This staff sergeant's statement clearly illustrates how this line of thinking can be detrimental to the Marine Corps. The anger that this Marine feels regarding a Marine Corps policy on how it assesses Marines impacts his personal feelings and actions toward a minority population of his fellow Marines. This kind of attitude can contribute to creating and perpetuating the hostile environments that many of the female Marines discussed.

Is fitness absolute or relative?

Some of this consternation surrounding the perceived lack of equality on the PFT may stem from the belief that the PFT is an *absolute* measure of fitness as opposed to a *relative* measure of fitness. The wording in the most recent PFT order does little to clarify this, simply stating, "The PFT is a collective measure of general fitness Marine Corps-wide. The PFT was specifically designed to test the strength and stamina of the upper body, midsection, and lower body, as well as efficiency of the cardiovascular and respiratory systems."¹³⁹ A common understanding among Marines as to the purpose and place of the PFT could go a long way toward alleviating these concerns.

A number of Marines took the opposite perspective of those in the previous discussion, stating that overall, nobody cares that there are different PFT standards and what matters is that the Marine can pass the PFT they are required to take, perform their job with competence, and bring something of value to their unit. A gunnery sergeant at MCB Camp Lejeune puts far less emphasis on outright physical strength and challenges the primacy of pull-ups when detailing what he wants from his Marines. He explained,

You know, we are all Marines first, right? Great. At the end of the day, males and females are males and females. You cannot lower the male fitness standards to then allow a female to attain them and expect that to go over well when the majority of the population doesn't really care that there's a difference in fitness standards. Again, I care that a female can pass a PFT. I care that she can go forward and do counterintelligence, human intelligence operations. That's great. I could care less if she can get on the bar and do 20 pull-ups. That's not my job. We're not doing pull-ups, you know, defeating the Russians with pull-ups. We're defeating Russians with competence and capability. ... We can have separate fitness standards. We can have separate uniforms, and we can still be equal. It's equal competence, equal capability, the ability to do your job.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁸ Participant #032, Staff Sergeant, Focus Group, MCB Camp Lejeune, 22 August 2017.

¹³⁹ MCBUL 6100 15 DEC 2016, MARINE CORPS PHYSICAL FITNESS AND COMBAT FITNESS TESTS.

¹⁴⁰ Participant #046, Gunnery Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

Missed Messaging Opportunities

This discussion of different physical standards may suffer from many of the same issues surrounding the current discourse on the value of diversity within the Marine Corps. To some Marines, “diversity” is a dirty word, a sort of external “politically correct” influence being forced on the Marine Corps by a civilian society that is out of touch with the reality and needs of the Marine Corps. For the Marines who participated in this research, especially the men, it seems a common perception that if you lower physical standards to include a previously excluded demographic into your organization, then you are automatically decreasing the effectiveness of that organization. This argument, however, ignores the fact that sometimes there are indeed very good reasons to want to bring new populations with new experiences into the Marine Corps. A major at MCAGCC Twentynine Palms explained,

Diversity just means different viewpoints. That's why we have different MOSs. That's why Marine officers are encouraged to be well-rounded and not just be completely infantry-centric or completely logistics-centric. That's why we ask them to read fucking books about foreign policy, about history, about quantum— I mean, I was reading about the quantum theory of war, which is somehow related to quantum theory in general, [*laughter*], which actually the link is, it's less made up than— and by made up I mean, I don't mean someone said, “Oh, I'm going to take quantum and throw it in front of theory of war and sound really smart.” No, there's actually a link there. There's actually a reason why it's called the quantum theory of war. You don't get that kind of groundbreaking thought process where you get to understand what fifth generation warfare really means from just having one viewpoint, which is, “Kill ‘em all, and let God sort ‘em out.” You can't kill your way to victory, but you don't understand that, you can't understand that unless you have a wide background and you've got a bunch of different people who are very smart with different perspectives looking at the same problem but from different angles. That's what diversity really means, and that's why diversity is really ... valuable. Diversity is not, “Okay. We have a hundred people. At least 50 of them have to be Hispanic, 40 of them have to be black, 30 of them have to be female, one of them has to be transgendered, and 17 of them have to be gay, right?” That's not— it's diversity, but that's not the goal. The goal is not to have a homogenous mix of different skin tones and sexual orientations and genders. Diversity is all about seeing different, getting different perspectives and being able to tackle complex problems looking at it through a different lens, which you get from having a black person at the table, a woman at the table, a gay person at the table, a tall person, a short person, whatever. So we are not good at explaining that to the lowest level of our Marines. They see diversity, and they see recruiting quotas. They see diversity, and they see, “Oh, that guy got this MOS because they needed black people in the MOS.”¹⁴¹

This argument as to why diversity makes the Marine Corps deadlier and more adaptable pairs well with a no-nonsense discussion of why there are different standards or why standards may change. It is not the Marine Corps' being forced to capitulate by a softer civilian society but rather a smart move to ensure the optimal readiness and adaptability of the Marine Corps in unpredictable future environments. In a male officer focus group at MCB Quantico, one captain

¹⁴¹ Participant #126, Major, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 19 September 2017.

spoke of the importance of Marine Corps leadership's being straightforward and transparent as to why they are making the changes that they are.

I can offer up an example of how it works. So like females in aviation. So we got a brief from ... General Brilakis when he was manpower, came [to the] postgraduate school to talk to us. He was explaining how they "primed the pump." He was like, "The reality is they lowered standards initially to get women into aviation. That just was what it was." ... He was saying it had to do with like, they weren't prepped for it before. They weren't actively seeking out, like the women who joined the military weren't offered the opportunity to go to aviation. So you didn't have a whole lot of people who were like, "oh, I want to be a pilot." It was just suddenly like, "hey, we're going to allow women in aviation now." Later, you get the ones who were like, "I'm gonna be a fucking pilot." And so they really crushed it all through whatever their training pipeline was up to that point. And so you get rock stars, no issue. Initially, he was saying, "you lowered standards." Now that affected both males and females. They both got in. It's just a lowering across the board, and they had to bring them back up. And the whole point was to get a certain surge of a demographic population to kind of build the, "hey, there are female pilots out there." And some of the capability and some of the people who got through arguably would not have gotten through before then and wouldn't get through nowadays. And that's something that he was like, "look, the fact is it exists here. It's stupid to try to hide from this." So he was like, "This has to be understood. And, yeah, you've got to deal with it."¹⁴²

¹⁴² Participant #105, Captain, Focus Group, MCB Quantico, 6 September 2017.

PART IV: What is it like to be both a woman and a Marine?

This section offers a glimpse into the lived experiences of female Marines and the everyday challenges that they face. Egregious wrongdoings aside,¹⁴³ female Marines reported that their lives are filled with experiences that make them feel as though they are perceived and treated differently from the average male Marine. Based on researcher insights, the experiences discussed in this section seem common among the female Marine participants. Within the range of scenarios that participants provided, two perceptions of women seem to undergird the differential treatment they received: 1) women are a nuisance or a danger, and 2) women make inadequate Marines.

An exploration of the everyday challenges that female Marines face is important because it highlights the ingrained biases that normalize the mistreatment of women and set the stage for more serious wrongdoings – such as sexual assault and online harassment – to occur. If Marines United and other incidents are indicative of a culture that “does not properly respect or value the contributions of women,”¹⁴⁴ then the ordinary experiences that normalize this environment of disrespect warrant attention. In this section, we provide a tour of these experiences, highlighting the following:

- 1) Negative perceptions about women were instilled in recruit training. Several participants (both male and female) reported being told by drill instructors to stay away from members of the opposite sex. Whatever the intention of this message was, it seemed to exacerbate the alienation of women.
- 2) Women encountered negative perceptions about female Marines upon entering the fleet. Stereotypes about female Marines preceded *actual* female Marines. For example, some female participants reported being told not to sleep around upon entering the fleet or a new unit. Other women talked about judging new women, hoping that they would not make all other women look bad.
- 3) In talking about the gendered politics of optics, we asked, “Who can be seen with whom?” Marines talked about the repercussions of female Marines spending “too much” time with those up the chain of command. This is an example of how the adage of “perception is reality” puts women at a disadvantage.
- 4) Women are highly concerned about appearing weak. As discussed in the PFT/CFT section above, physical strength is paramount in the Marine Corps, and women recognized that they are not starting off on an even playing field. Some women discussed how they tried to deflect or mitigate this reality by pushing themselves physically, to mixed results.
- 5) Perceptions of poor performance shape women’s experiences. Women often perceived themselves as working twice as hard to get the same amount of respect as men because they have to account for automatically being viewed as inferior. Several male Marines concurred with this perception.

¹⁴³ Female participants gave firsthand accounts of being targets of male wrongdoing, and both male and female participants gave secondhand accounts of wrongdoings that they witnessed or heard about. Wrongdoings include (but are not limited to) verbal harassment, sexual harassment, and sexual assault.

¹⁴⁴ Mitchell, “Court-martial possible.”

- 6) In another instance of “perception is reality,” sexual stereotypes about female Marines impact women personally and professionally. Women addressed the inescapability of the bitch/whore/dyke categorization of female Marines, especially as junior enlisted Marines.
- 7) Women and men alike talked about how women’s authority is often undermined or diminished on the basis of their sex alone. Women discussed how this has shaped their careers and their experiences as leaders.¹⁴⁵

Early Negative Perceptions in Recruit Training

Female participants conveyed that male Marines did not seem to know how to treat them. This may be because men are not used to working and socializing with female Marines. Given that the percentage of women in the Marine Corps is so low and that recruit training is segregated, it was not surprising for a woman to say that she was the only woman in her unit or for a junior enlisted man to say that he had not yet worked with a woman. But beyond the reality of sex disproportions in the Corps, several participants recounted that as recruits and junior Marines, they heard messaging from drill instructors and commanders that exacerbated the alienation of women. The message is this: women are dangerous, so stay away. Whatever the intentions are behind this message, an outcome is that women are portrayed as “the problem” from the start. For instance, a female 1st sergeant recalled a conversation she had with her Marine husband when they were both drill instructors. They were discussing how male drill instructors warned their recruits to stay away from female Marines, and she said, “Why would you tell the recruits to stay away from women? Why? That gets in their minds that women are bad, they’re ‘red,’ they’re ‘stay away,’ they’re ‘don’t go near.’” She continued by offering her perspective on the impact this message might have on recruits, “They don’t even know why. They just know somebody who they admire, their drill instructor, somebody who they aspire to be like, those individuals are telling them ‘stay away, don’t go near, bad-bad-bad.’”¹⁴⁶

Many male Marines reported being told to stay away from females at some point in their career. Some women also reported being told not to associate with men but noted that this was difficult to do considering the demographics of the Corps. Combined with the low number of women in the fleet, the message that the opposite sex should be avoided seems to have more resonance with men and, thus, a more negative impact on women.

Early Negative Perceptions upon Entering the Fleet

While women can attempt to manage how others perceive them, they discussed how they cannot control the preconceived notions of others. This was an issue when women entered a new unit. For example, one Marine, who is married to a male Marine, recounted her experience checking into her first unit after the Basic School (TBS).

Straight out of TBS, came here ... just so excited to be part of the Marine Corps, sat down, introduced myself to my commanding officer. One of the first things he says to me is, “Well, you’re one of three females here. We had an incident with the last female that was

¹⁴⁵ This section is focused on women’s experiences and perspectives. Men’s related experiences will be addressed in subsequent analysis.

¹⁴⁶ Participant #306, 1st Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 13 September 2017.

here. So, I'm not going to have this issue where you come in here – where I'm going to need to sit down with you in the future about you sleeping with anybody, am I?" And I just kind of sat there [*laughs*] like, "What do I say to this? Like would you ask a man that?" ... Had I been a different person and maybe had I been a little bit more seasoned as a lieutenant – I was a boot – ... I told [my CO], "No, I guarantee you that is something you and I will never have to discuss," but then I told my husband when I was at home and he's like, "Holy shit." He's like, "That's something we [male Marines] would never have to deal with." [I]n that moment I was like, "Damn it." I pride myself in [being] somebody who is very outspoken, and I sat there, and I took it.¹⁴⁷

Male Marines are not alone in prejudging women who arrive in a unit. Women also say that they are judgmental of one another, in part because individual women are perceived as representative of all. In a mixed gender focus group at MCB Camp Butler, a female corporal explained,

I would say with females there's a lot of negative stigma. For me, the way I see females is whenever we get a new female, all the other females are holding their breath like "Is she going to be a good Marine? Is she going to be lazy? Is she going to be good at PT? Is she going to make us look bad?" ... [S]o there's like a lot of negative stigma, so when you get a new female, more often than not you're worried that they're just going to make other females look bad.¹⁴⁸

This has the potential to contribute to a lack of cohesion among women, who sometimes spoke about being competitive with one another and not wanting to associate with other women for fear of being ascribed the negative reputation of another female Marine.

Who can be seen with whom?

The perception that women are dangerous manifests in everyday actions. For example, during a focus group with four male staff NCOs, participants talked about how the common practice of not being alone behind closed doors with female Marines has damaging repercussions. To address this possibility, a master sergeant explained that he has someone else in the room regardless of whether he is speaking to a man or woman.

*MSgt H:*¹⁴⁹ I would do it on both sides of the table because if you don't, you're actually breeding that–

*SSgt J:*¹⁵⁰ You're promoting the stigma.

MSgt H: [Y]ou're breeding it, and you promote it. Not intentionally, but I guarantee you that the little lance corporal on the ground said, "Man, any time he brings a female in his office, he brings somebody in there with him." And I guarantee you the female was saying, "He never brings anybody into the office. Why did he talk with lance corporal [*name removed per human subjects protection protocol*] by himself, but every time he talks to me he brings somebody in the office?" ... If you continue that, I guarantee you it's being watched, and it's being learned.

¹⁴⁷ Participant #045, 1st Lieutenant, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

¹⁴⁸ Participant #264, Corporal, Focus Group, MCB Camp Butler, 18 October 2017.

¹⁴⁹ Participant #236, Master Sergeant, Focus Group, MCAS Yuma, 26 September 2017.

¹⁵⁰ Participant #522, Staff Sergeant, Focus Group, MCAS Yuma, 26 September 2017.

SSgt J: Yeah, that's a bigger point, is it becomes learned behavior from other people that are like, "Oh, we have to treat someone differently than we would another junior Marine in the same exact situation." And you don't.

As the master sergeant pointed out, Marines are watching one another and sometimes coming to negative conclusions based merely on appearances. A female sergeant talked about how she would often talk to her officer in charge (OIC) alone in his office because she felt that he was the most competent on the work-related issues she brought before him. Others, including her staff NCO, perceived this relationship to be non-professional, and her staff NCO retaliated by giving her low pros and cons.

Moderator: But your OIC obviously did notice your quality as a Marine. But this was also a problem because your enlisted supervisor decided that that meant you guys had some kind of other relationship beyond what was normal.

*Sgt A:*¹⁵¹ Mm-hmm.

Moderator: Do you have any idea what gave him that idea?

Sgt A: Just because we talked a lot, but it was all work related. I'd go to his office a lot, but that— his office was right outside our office. But I had to because nobody else knew how to do the work I was doing, and if I had a question I couldn't just ask one of my NCOs. They'd be, "I don't know. Go ask your OIC."

Moderator: Hmm. Yeah. I mean I've heard this before. I mean just even having a conversation gets—

Sgt A: Taken out of context.

This type of situation, where women's behavior is prejudged to be inappropriate solely because they are women, seems to be common for female Marines.

Fear of Appearing Weak

Women discussed how they perceive an almost constant need to monitor and adjust their behavior, even to their detriment at times, so as not to be perceived in a negative light. For instance, during a focus group with three junior enlisted women, a corporal stated that she did not want to give the men she works with any reason to see her as different from them.

Like if [I] need help if- like if something is too heavy, I'd just do it. I'd just do it, and I'd pray that box don't fall on me or something like that. Because I don't want to ask, and I don't want to make it seem like they're like, "Well, you guys are weak." Like, you know? I don't want us to look like that because that's not true.¹⁵²

In this research, many participants discussed elemental aspects of what makes women and men different, including physical strength. In the same vein, women's emotional strength is often perceived to be lower, and this perceived deficiency can be viewed as a weakness. This can create an environment in which women minimize and normalize misbehavior both within their own thinking and in their deliberations about reporting. One woman explained why she does not report when men make inappropriate comments to her. "As a female, I feel most of us don't want to complain about it because it just seems like we're weaker and that we can't handle it on our

¹⁵¹ Participant #041, Sergeant, Focus Group, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

¹⁵² Participant #233, Corporal, Focus Group, MCAS Yuma, 26 September 2017.

own.”¹⁵³ As we have seen with the Marines United example, women may be scrutinized for their behavior when they do report incidents, and, therefore, those situations may go unreported.¹⁵⁴

Perceptions of Poor Performance

Relatedly, participants talked about how the actions and attributes of women are scrutinized – by both men and women – on a level that men’s actions are not. Commenting on this, a male master gunnery sergeant said,

If you have a male Marine who's below average or average at physical training and there's a female Marine that's the same level, they'll say, “Oh yeah look at that female Marine. She's weak and can't do this or can't do that,” but they wouldn't say anything about the male Marine for the exact same circumstances.¹⁵⁵

A female 1st sergeant also spoke to this double standard and how much harder she perceived she had to work just to be seen as equal to the lowest performing male.

I've always had to prove myself on how I can perform as a Marine. It gets old, though. Because I can be doing better than your most awful Marine that you have, male Marine. And I'll still have to work harder. And I will still have to work harder to get the perception away from peers and seniors that [*long pause*] women can't do the job.¹⁵⁶

In some cases, expectations that women will be low performers may even determine whether instructors will offer remedial training or SNCOs will take the time to mentor junior Marines.

The Inescapability of Sexual Stereotypes

A 1st sergeant expressed her frustration about stereotypes and labels, specifically the entrenched message that female Marines have the option of being one of three things: a slut, bitch, or dyke. Enlisted women have received this message from their drill instructors.¹⁵⁷

And that's the bad thing. ... We get labels. And it's not labels that we create. It's labels that the men give us. Either you're gonna be a slut or you're gonna be a bitch and you're making us choose. Why can't I just be a professional? Why can't I just be a professional just like you? You're a Marine. You give me the ultimatum. Why? That, that irritates me. That's everywhere.¹⁵⁸

Women often expressed a lack of agency regarding the labels that they receive. A lance corporal, for example, realized quickly how “perception is reality” can mean that she has very little agency in how she is viewed. If she is hanging around with male Marines, which is a very common occurrence for female Marines due to demographics, she is labeled a slut.

¹⁵³ Participant #041, Sergeant, Focus Group, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

¹⁵⁴ The decision-making process about whether or not to report a wrong-doing is discussed in several sections of this report. The decision is complex not only for those victimized by wrongdoing but also for those who witness it. The team expects to examine this issue in greater detail in future reports.

¹⁵⁵ Participant #231, Master Gunnery Sergeant, Interview, MCAS Yuma, 25 September 2017.

¹⁵⁶ Participant #220, 1st Sergeant, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 18 September 2017.

¹⁵⁷ This categorization of female Marines has been explored in other research. See, for example, Emerald M. Archer, “The power of gendered stereotypes in the US Marine Corps,” *Armed Forces & Society*, 39, no. 2 (2013): 359-391.

¹⁵⁸ Participant #220, 1st Sergeant, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 18 September 2017.

There's rumors going around constantly. ... A lot of them thought I was a slut even though I don't sleep around or I don't do anything crazy like that. I don't know. It's just, it's hard to get through that 'cause you're just like "that's not who I am at all!" I go to church every Sunday. I'm well-behaved. I do exactly what I'm supposed to. But everybody will have like this completely different concept of you because perception is reality in the Marine Corps. Really, and as a female if you hang out with men all the time, if you wear a short dress, or if you get something that's a little bit too low cut, or if you wear high heels, which I do all the time, that's because you want it, 'cause you're looking to get some, not because they happen to make my legs look good and I like it.¹⁵⁹

A 1st sergeant talked about how women who "reject" the advances of male Marines can become the topic of rumors in the barracks and the unit. These rumors, however, are unequally applied because where women may be called a slut despite saying "no," a man who pursues sex with one or many women is praised.

But it's when you say "no" and they're still adamant about carrying on, like, "What don't you understand about no?" Right? And then the woman has to go, she has to be a bitch or she has to be something in order for you to get it, and then you call her these negative things. ... They couldn't take the rejection well or would just take one wrong guy, one minor rejection, all of a sudden you're this and you're that. ... Once I became a staff NCO, we're older than the rest of the Marines. And so we see it from different eyes. If I started getting wind of "so-and-so and she did this or she did that," a lot of times I would pull her in and ask her if she's okay, what's going on, and then she would get upset because so-and-so asked her out and she told him she didn't want to go out with him or whatever it was. But it's funny because now there's a rumor about her. And I always told them, my mentality is, "Guys or girls, if you want to sleep around with as many people as you want, go ahead. If you're not married, if you're practicing safe sex, knock yourself out." But the women can't dare even dabble because it's all these names and all these reputations, these things are going around about her. The guys, of course, it's the thumbs up ...¹⁶⁰

For women who participated in this research, the frustration lies not only in the fact that they are unfairly labeled but also in that this label diminishes achievements, as was the case with the MCB Camp Lejeune sergeant who received low pros and cons for speaking to her OIC to do her job better. As discussed below, negative views of women may also undermine a woman's ability to lead.

On Not Being Listened to or Respected

Female Marine leaders saw their leadership capabilities constantly questioned because of their sex. A major, for example, said,

I've been fortunate to have worked for males and females, and the things that males can do and say and not bat an eye, if the female were to say the same thing, it would just be totally taken out of context. They perceive it differently. So, you can be a female and you can be strong, and you're smart and everything. But make a decision, and all of a sudden, everyone

¹⁵⁹ Participant #270, Lance Corporal, Focus Group, MCB Camp Butler, 18 October 2017.

¹⁶⁰ Participant #306, 1st Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 13 September 2017.

thinks it's a horrible decision. "They don't know what they're talking about. They don't know." So, whereas [*laughs*] a male leader makes the same decision and it's like, "Well, he's the CO, he must know what he's doing."¹⁶¹

She continued that, unlike her male colleagues, she was told, "Well, prove to me that your decision is a right one. ... Prove to me that you know what you're doing.' Whereas ... you didn't have that same expectation, that same level of scrutiny, I don't think, as a male."¹⁶² A male master gunnery sergeant stated that while he sees the gender gap in the Marine Corps improving, he still believes that women are not treated as equals and that the bias against women is even more nuanced when you take into account appearance. He said that this is more prevalent on the officer side.

I've seen that all the time where they don't get the time of day at all. I've seen it like hundreds of times in my career, where especially it's worse for the female officers you know. Unless you're like really hot? ... If the ones that are really attractive, then people like, "Oh she's really attractive," and they'll get favoritism 'cause they really attractive. But if they're just like average looking or maybe they're like a minority, they don't get the time of day.¹⁶³

Female participants also talked about how their male counterparts talked disrespectfully about their achievements, attributing them to favoritism and their sex.

I got meritoriously promoted when I was a corporal, and everybody was saying, "Oh, it's 'cause she's a female." ... A lot of people were really mean to me about it for winning. ... I worked my butt off, and I sacrificed weekends to study and get my uniforms ready and everything else, and looking at my stats, they were a lot better than everyone else's, but I still— everyone gave me a hard time.¹⁶⁴

Within the confines of this report, it is not feasible to present the full range of challenges women face in the Marine Corps or their perceptions, positive and negative, on those challenges. The preceding examples are provided as illustrations rather than a comprehensive assessment.

¹⁶¹ Participant #303, Major, Interview, MCB Quantico, 7 September 2017.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Participant #231, Master Gunnery Sergeant, MCAS Yuma, 25 September 2017.

¹⁶⁴ Participant #061, Staff Sergeant, Interview, MCAS Cherry Point, 24 August 2017.

PART V: Hostile Environments

In this section, we present three seemingly unrelated topics that have two elements in common. They are all Marine challenges that surfaced unexpectedly in interviews and focus groups, and they all involve Marines' experiencing hostility in specific environments: the aviation community, the barracks, and the workplace. We use the term "hostile" to indicate that, to varying degrees, some Marines experienced feelings of stress, exclusion, or danger in these environments. The term is not meant to imply that these environments are wholly, unequivocally hostile, but instead that some Marines have had negative experiences in these otherwise "normal" environments. Through these three topics, we 1) show how the normalization of environments can also include the normalization of questionable (though often unquestioned) expectations, 2) bring contrast to the environments that are often seen as benign and neutral by showing how people who are "different" might have challenges in navigating these environments, and 3) identify potential problem areas that might benefit from further research. First, the section provides voices of those in the aviation community who spoke of the stresses and hardships that might be specific to – or intensified within – that environment. Second, it draws on examples from barracks to show how men and women can feel excluded and in danger in a place that is supposed to be a safe and domestic environment. Lastly, it looks at workplace environments through the eyes of pregnant and breastfeeding Marines to show how these normal places are not always conducive to accommodating two normal parts of the human experience – pregnancy and breastfeeding.

Is there something going on in the aviation community?

As we progressed through data collection, we became aware of a recurring theme within the aviation community: there may be a problem with cohesion. This section addresses the following:

- 1) Marine participants with connections to the aviation community described challenges with cohesion.
- 2) High turnover, misplaced values, and leadership attitudes may be contributing to the problem.
- 3) The preliminary status of these insights suggest the need to dig deeper into this before drawing any conclusions, as many factors could be influencing the data.

Participants currently within the community and those who had transferred out characterized the community as having cohesion issues. Participants discussed the impact of personnel turnover on enlisted morale and the troubling dismissive attitudes of officer peers and senior leaders. Given that this is a preliminary review of our data, we remind readers of the need to apply caution before drawing any conclusions about the aviation element.¹⁶⁵ Perhaps a higher number of disgruntled aviation personnel self-selected to participate in this research. Or perhaps those in the ground or logistics elements experienced similar dynamics but were less bothered by them. It is

¹⁶⁵ Of the 267 total participants in this study, 40 Marines and officers were from the aviation command element. Additionally, there were several participants who formerly were part of the aviation community.

possible that aviation Marines see their community as unique, when in fact, similar issues occur throughout the Marine Corps.

Aviation Marines discussed morale concerns, especially on the enlisted side. A master sergeant aviation mechanic reported seeing morale issues throughout his community. He attributed this to the difficulties in building trust and cohesion in the shop, which is hampered by attrition and frequent reassignments. East Coast personnel, he said, are burnt out because the Marine Corps is “constantly shifting around personnel around to meet necessary qualifications in order to go on deployment.”¹⁶⁶ In contrast, when he entered the Marine Corps, he stayed in the same unit from lance corporal to staff sergeant, which allowed him and his peers to build a “family-like environment” despite the normal ebb and flow of personnel. According to him, the ability to build such cohesion over years is “unheard of these days,” and a high level of cohesion in the maintenance department is just as important to safety and survival as it is for the infantry who rely on Marines on their right and left.

Today’s Marine Corps, because we shuffle everything so much, there’s very few units that I’ve been around that have that cohesion. It doesn’t necessarily always breed negativity. ... But in some cases it does. I mean, from what I understand the 53s that crashed off Hawaii – the culture in that environment was absolutely horrible.¹⁶⁷

The master sergeant shared examples of where he fostered better cohesion despite the high turnover. This produced good results when the senior leaders were supportive. However, when an “officer-centric” senior leader was in charge, where it was “his way or no way,” the result tended to be “crappy morale,” according to this master sergeant.¹⁶⁸

Several participants discussed the aviation community’s emphasis on work and work performance, its devaluation of family, and the superiority complex of some of the leaders. A V22 pilot offered an officer’s perspective of the negative effects of exclusively focusing on work performance. He reported that pilots are measured by their “flight hours, flight qualifications, and flight designations,”¹⁶⁹ that the larger the number, the better the performance, and that the numbers must be met at any cost. “The message right now, at least in the wing community, is that it’s only okay to succeed at work, and succeeding at home is not even thought of.”¹⁷⁰ A former pilot expanded on this disregard for family with a story about her husband, also a Marine pilot. He had flown to Las Vegas from Yuma for a day-training. However, the group left the day prior so that they could spend a night on the town. Her husband said he would have preferred to spend that time with his wife and newborn son. She recounted the other pilot’s response to her husband as, “‘Well, I don’t see why you have to justify this trip to your wife.’ And he was like ‘quite honestly, you want to know what I tell my wife?’ He’s like, ‘I tell my wife ‘Hey, babe. I’m going on the road with the boys, and there’s nothing you can do about it.’”¹⁷¹ The V22 pilot shared another example where a senior officer degraded junior Marines. While on deployment, the commanding officer told him to ensure the junior Marines were emptying the office trash

¹⁶⁶ Participant #641, Master Sergeant, Interview, MCAS Yuma, 27 September 2017.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

¹⁶⁹ Participant #114, Major, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 12 September 2017.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Participant #235, Captain, Interview, MCAS Yuma, 26 September 2017.

cans. Though the request was valid, the major was bothered by the sentiment behind his word choice. “He said exactly that, ‘they’re like minions.’ I cut in and said, ‘you mean, they’re more like Marines, sir.’”¹⁷²

The experience of the former pilot from above indicates possible intensified sexism in the aviation community. She transitioned out of aviation and into another field after becoming fed up the unprofessional environment of aviation and because her performance had declined. She described a catch-22 where her performance depended on participating with other pilots in group study, as critical to pilot training as flight hours. She was ostracized by this group and, at the same time, may have felt reluctant to spend even more time with her harassers.¹⁷³ “The outside was very painful. It was very lonely, very isolated. But I was also expected to seek help and professional guidance and be able to study with people that would harass me.”¹⁷⁴ After she transitioned out of aviation, she ran into a friend from flight school, and she described his unsurprised reaction to her decision to leave aviation.

He's like, “Hey, I heard you are not a pilot anymore. What happened?” I was like, “Oh, I just did not want to be part of that environment anymore.” He's like, “What? You didn't like being sexually harassed every day?” And this guy is removed by the entire Pacific Ocean, was stationed in Hawaii, completely removed from me for the last six years. And it was a completely different unit and he knew exactly why I would not want to be part of that certain environment.¹⁷⁵

Throughout her interview, this former pilot expressed that she now faces less hostility in her new field. Another female pilot who left the air wing talked about a similar environment in her first squadron. She described the watchful, on-edge feeling she had on her first day, wearing her Alphas and walking into the building to check in. “I don't remember exactly who was there [standing in the smoke pit] but there were a couple of crew chiefs and mechanics and maybe a couple pilots ... watching me very intently ... I can remember thinking, ‘Huh, I have no idea who I can trust in that group.’”¹⁷⁶ The unit was not entirely hostile; she also knew some supportive pilots. But it only took a few who “didn't want her there” to make her “life hell.” In her next unit, she explained that her commander believed in her, and that was “fantastic.” However, once she was left the squadron altogether, “things were so much better.”¹⁷⁷ This lieutenant colonel was among the first female Marine pilots. Despite ensuing years and more female pilots, a captain's experiences are uncannily similar. It may prove beneficial to learn more about the integration of females in the aviation community as a way of anticipating pitfalls for female officers in the infantry.

Overall, many of the complaints that current and former aviation community members had are not uncommon in the Marine Corps, where work and “mandatory fun” can sometimes take priority over family, junior Marines are often expected to do menial tasks, and the mistreatment

¹⁷² Participant #114, Major, Interview, Camp Pendleton, 12 September 2017.

¹⁷³ In the PFT/CFT section above, we mention that aviation has lowered standards purposefully so as to allow more diversity to enter their community. However, this former pilot's experience indicates that the inclusion is not always a smooth and uncomplicated process.

¹⁷⁴ Participant #235, Captain, Interview, MCAS Yuma, 26 September 2017.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Participant #608, Lieutenant Colonel, Interview, Pentagon, 7 September 2017.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

of women is widespread. Further, enlisted and officer perceptions mentioned here could be in the minority due to self-selection to participate. On the other hand, they could indicate a trend about leadership in the aviation community that is worthy of future research. It may not just be a matter of presence of these issues, but also a matter of their intensity in the aviation community. A future study could be designed to answer specific questions about what, if any, unique stressors or environmental factors affect morale and cohesion in the aviation command element.

What goes on in Marine Corps barracks?

The barracks play an important role in the lives of many enlisted Marines. A Marine may make positive relationships here, be ostracized, or be victimized. Every barracks is a unique social environment with an internal leadership structure that is imbricated with unit leadership. Extra attention may be warranted to ensure Marines have a safe space to revive and thrive. The following themes stood out to us as we spoke to Marines:

- 1) The barracks are a public/private space, central in the lives of many enlisted Marines.
- 2) External factors (such as base location, type of barracks, and effectiveness of leadership) can affect the barracks environment.
- 3) Identity factors (such as sex, rank, and personality characteristics) can affect how Marines experience the barracks.
- 4) Overly strict or overly lax disciplinary measures can increase harm to Marines and, therefore, pose difficult choices for leadership inside and outside of the barracks.
- 5) Female Marines, especially when they are new arrivals to the barracks, can be especially vulnerable, and may engage in self-isolating or self-silencing behaviors in particularly hostile environments.

What goes on in Marine barracks? The question may seem simple on its surface, but the answer is not. Barracks serve both a private and shared function for enlisted Marines. Insofar as they can be inspected at any time, barracks are not a private space, but Marines do have some privacy. Marines sleep in the barracks, and yet due to the 24-hour nature of their work, someone is likely coming and going at all hours (including both sanctioned and unsanctioned activities). The barracks are a place where the Uniform Code of Military Justice, Marine Corps orders, and rank hierarchy apply. At the same time, it should come as little surprise that fraternization, underage drinking, and pornography use occur there. Eighteen-year-olds away from home for the first time live there alongside Marines who have deployed and faced combat situations. The barracks can be a place where “people do a lot of shady things,”¹⁷⁸ and they can be a place where prejudice disappears and friendships are formed. At their worst, the barracks may be a hostile environment, especially for women. Every barracks is different, and what Marines experience in the barracks depends on a combination of sex, rank, base location, leadership, and other factors.

Marines in this research intuitively acknowledged the importance of location in the way they spoke about the barracks. Participants described how the barracks life at their different duty stations varied. For a few Marines, Okinawa stood out among the others because of the local

¹⁷⁸ Participant #051, Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

prohibition on having cars and its relatively small footprint. A sergeant fondly recalled his time in Okinawa where “everybody knew each other.”

[In Okinawa] you have to sign out with somebody else. That builds a lot of unit cohesion and basically friendships that are long-lasting. I still talk to everybody I knew from Okinawa to this day. I hardly talk to anybody in this unit, and I’ve been [at MCB Camp Lejeune] almost 4 years.¹⁷⁹

While not all Marines who participated in the research preferred Okinawa, those who did tended to enjoy the level of cohesion there as compared to bases in the United States. Another sergeant described life at MCB Camp Lejeune where, after Marines get chow, they “come back, lock themselves in their room. You won’t see them again until work starts the next day.”¹⁸⁰ This isolating behavior may be related to more than just the barracks’ location, as will be discussed later. However, barracks life is undoubtedly influenced by not just the base itself, but the lifestyle, geography, and legal system outside the base.

The Marines to whom we spoke explained that each type of barracks is also different. Recruit depot barracks are sex-segregated, whereas at the schoolhouse or duty station, they are often mixed-sex. At the schoolhouse, Marines may have more time to be with their same-rank classmates than they do at their duty station, where Marines have more activities and responsibilities. Some Marines described a progression where behavior, especially sexual activity and drinking, worsened as young men and women progressed from boot camp to Marine Corps Training (MCT) to their first duty station, where they proceeded to “lose their mind.”¹⁸¹ A corporal attributed this poor decision-making to boredom or heartache. “Homesickness has to be [taken] into account. Because, again, you take young kids that just barely graduated high school—from having all the freedom in the world to UCMJ on top of them.”¹⁸²

On the one hand, a few participants viewed barracks life as offering a new level of freedom that some Marines were unprepared to navigate. On the other hand, participants also described the impact Marine Corps restrictions have on what is considered to be normal behavior in the civilian world. According to one colonel, if Marines agree to consensual sex, they must leave the base or find ways to avoid getting caught on base. He believed this was unnecessarily restrictive.

They’re hiding the fact that they’re having sex, even though for that age group, it’s probably not uncommon that they would be having sex, consensual sex. So, we act surprised when they go to have sex. In a normal base like Pendleton, or places where there’s hotels closer, it’s not that big a deal for them to have individual sex. But in [Twentynine Palms] they’re having sex in the barracks because they can’t get to a hotel.¹⁸³

A captain described how these restrictions can lead to early marriage, which can add additional stress in a Marine’s personal life.

There’s no way to progress a relationship in the Marine Corps for the junior Marines because they either live in the barracks or they get married and live out in town, and it feels like that puts a lot of pressure on the relationship right away to not only live together but

¹⁷⁹ Participant #024, Sergeant, Focus Group, MCB Camp Lejeune, 22 August 2017.

¹⁸⁰ Participant #051, Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

¹⁸¹ Participant #617, Colonel, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 18 September 2017.

¹⁸² Participant #637, Corporal, Interview, MCAS Yuma, 25 September 2017.

¹⁸³ Participant #617, Colonel, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 18 September 2017.

then get married at the same time. When you're in a long term relationship, [I want to live] with my long term person to figure out if I want to get engaged ... And now, it's just sort of very white and black.¹⁸⁴

Junior enlisted women arriving to a new unit may be especially vulnerable in the barracks. Males in the barracks were compared to predators, like sharks circling, by the aforementioned colonel.¹⁸⁵ Women to whom we spoke described how difficult it could be to navigate the barracks' social dynamics and preserve their reputation. Some Marines talked about how, if a female Marine does engage in consensual sex, she can be labeled a "barracks ho,"¹⁸⁶ but the same is true even when she is not sexually active.¹⁸⁷ They also explained how, when a woman does not want to engage in sex and also does not want to have her reputation discussed in the barracks' rumor mill, she may end up isolating herself. One sergeant described typical behavior among these Marines.

They just do their thing, they do their job, they do it well. They go to the barracks, they're just kind of like, "I'm gonna watch some Netflix, go to the gym later, get some chow, and go to bed." And that's fine, that's fine. It's better to do that than party with possibly the wrong crowd and get in trouble and do something that'll ruin your career.¹⁸⁸

There may be a "wrong crowd" as well as positive influences in a barracks, but a woman may have to be anti-social to avoid any misperceptions. Meanwhile, Marines pointed out that a male's mistakes or sexual encounters are unlikely to be a topic of discussion or derision. A major illustrated this double standard with his comments. "Are there shitty dudes who are the equivalent [of barracks hos]? Yes, of course, there are. But because [females] are a smaller portion of the population, they are that much more visible when they do screw up, and that's part of the problem."¹⁸⁹

Female participants discussed how they were scrutinized if they reported harassment or assault. As one sergeant said, "I personally knew of someone that reported a sexual assault, and everyone in the barracks, all the guys would say, 'Oh, stay away from her. She's gonna get you into trouble.'"¹⁹⁰ This perception potentially is based on both the possibility that false allegations could ruin an innocent Marine's career and the stereotype that women are dangerous. So as to avoid this negative perception, women described giving careful consideration to whether to report an incident. One lance corporal tried to convince her roommate to report an alleged sexual assault and even helped her get to the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (SAPR) office, but her roommate was hesitant, in part because she had engaged in underage drinking and in part because an NJP process was already underway for the male NCO for an unrelated offense.

*LCpl:*¹⁹¹ My roommate got raped at a party by a NCO. I mean, he's already gotten NJP'd. ... I've told her like she should go on [record], and I think she already has. ...

Interviewer: So she did report it?

¹⁸⁴ Participant #214, Captain, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 12 September 2017.

¹⁸⁵ Participant #617, Colonel, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 18 September 2017.

¹⁸⁶ Participant #126, Major, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 19 September 2017.

¹⁸⁷ See the section above about what it is like to be both a woman and a Marine.

¹⁸⁸ Participant #071, Sergeant, Interview, MCAS Cherry Point, 24 August 2017.

¹⁸⁹ Participant #126, Major, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 19 September 2017.

¹⁹⁰ Participant #041, Sergeant, Focus Group, MCB Camp Lejeune, 22 August 2017.

¹⁹¹ Participant #624, Lance Corporal, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 19 September 2017.

LCpl: I'm pretty s– I don't– I'm pretty sure. I mean, I was the one that dropped her off. I don't know if she actually reported it. But I dropped her off at SAPR or whatever it is. And I mean he got NJP'd, but I mean he's still–

Interviewer: He's still there?

LCpl: We live in the same barracks. And it's just, I mean for her, like in her head now, I guess she's blocked it. I mean, it's been a few months. It has been a long time ago. So I guess she let it go. And that's something that a lot of us kinda do. We just kinda let things go. Like, "Whatever." Like, "We're gonna see him. We live with them. We can't hold it against them." We just don't do anything.

For this lance corporal, who had been at her current duty station for six months, a "few months" was a "long time ago." The matter-of-fact tone she took in regard to the fact that the alleged rapist was still in their barracks perhaps belies how fraught with danger this space can be for single women. Like her, other women let it go when they experienced anything from mild to serious sexual assault because they felt speaking up about such incidents rarely resulted in resolution and inevitably resulted in verbal harassment.

Officers may be perceived as "outsiders" when it comes to the barracks, as illustrated by the fact that they were rarely mentioned in participant accounts of barracks life. A major said this is how the system works. "But the officers, how often are they visiting the barracks? ... It's the communication mechanism that has been instituted in this organization. There is a divide between officer and enlisted."¹⁹² This divide may also extend to senior enlisted. However, participants noted that leadership outside of the barracks as well as inside the barracks can be important. As one master gunnery sergeant explained, a barracks with poor leadership can affect a Marine's overall outlook. "I think morale for the Marines begins at the BEQ."^{193,194} He described a visit to a barracks where the front entryway was "filled with cigarette butts," which he considered to be the result of a "lack of leadership involvement."¹⁹⁵

If poor leadership inside the barracks contributes to a hostile environment, officers and senior enlisted who live outside the barracks may struggle to find ways to address what goes on inside, due to the aforementioned divide. A captain stated how, despite her authority as an officer, "there's not a whole lot you can do about barracks talk."¹⁹⁶ A staff NCO described how the work environment inside his shop was affected by barracks dynamics. He had to move male Marines out of his shop because of issues that seemed more "like you were back in high school."¹⁹⁷ This research was not designed to investigate the limits of unit leadership in the barracks, but preliminary data indicate that certain incidents or issues may remain under the unit's leadership radar because of physical separation and other barriers to reporting.

The barracks play a prominent role in the lives of most enlisted Marines. They are where lifelong friendships are made, and cohesion is built. They may also be where many NJPs originate. At their worst, they can become a hostile environment. Senior leaders asked us to explore topics of

¹⁹² Participant #605, Major, Interview, Pentagon, 6 September 2017.

¹⁹³ Bachelor enlisted quarters.

¹⁹⁴ Participant #321, Master Gunnery Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Butler, 18 October 2017.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁹⁶ Participant #606, Captain, Interview, Pentagon, 6 September 2017.

¹⁹⁷ Participant #054, Gunnery Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

social cohesion, gender bias, and leadership in this research. This discussion shows how all three topics are part of barracks life, and our data provide food for thought and potential future research questions. For instance, to what degree are factors of life in the barracks affecting command climate? Does the PME for SNCOs address leadership in the barracks? For officers, does PME address the challenge of barracks' oversight from the position of an outsider? Are Marines prepared for critical events that may affect their roommates, such as sexual assault, bullying or hazing, unplanned pregnancy, isolation, and depression? Open-ended research techniques such as participant observation and qualitative interviews lend themselves to a future study on barracks living and the impact of the barracks on the lives of enlisted Marines as well as their leadership.

Navigating the Marine Corps while Pregnant

*What if she decides to have a child? If she decides to get pregnant and start a family, she'll be out of that club.*¹⁹⁸

~ Captain, MCAS Yuma, on the first female infantry officer

During one of the first focus groups for this project, after the moderator had introduced the topic of the "ideal" Marine, a participant proposed a poignant question, "Do you think people would think a pregnant Marine is an ideal Marine?"¹⁹⁹ The question was met with a frustrated "probably not"²⁰⁰ from another Marine in the focus group who happened to be pregnant. Although pregnancy was not a topic of concern at the outset of this project, it quickly became clear that pregnancy and breastfeeding were lightning rod issues that illuminated the ubiquitous yet latent ideals that shape the Corps and beliefs of how a Marine should be.

- 1) Stereotypes about pregnant Marines may have some basis in reality, but they impact the experience of female Marines no matter what.
- 2) As a result, several female Marines with whom we spoke talked about pushing themselves to the limit so as not to live up to the stereotype. This sets the bar high for female Marines who want to prove that a pregnant Marine can still be a good Marine.
- 3) Many Marines also reported encountering ignorance about policies and orders surrounding pregnancy and breastfeeding in their workplaces, creating an environment where pregnant or breastfeeding women ran up against a lot of unnecessary friction.
- 4) Leadership often sets the tone for how pregnant and breastfeeding women will be treated. For some Marines with whom we spoke, this tone was negative, ranging from awkward to hostile. Others told stories in which they braced themselves for the worst but found that their leadership was open and accommodating to their pregnancy or their desire to one day become pregnant.
- 5) Finally, in questioning what needs to change to make pregnancy less of an obstacle in the Marine Corps, we offer the perspectives of two Marines who challenge the notion that pregnancy is a burden or a weakness.

¹⁹⁸ Participant #230, Captain, Interview, MCAS Yuma, 25 September 2017.

¹⁹⁹ Participant #010, Major, Focus Group, MCB Quantico, 16 August 2017.

²⁰⁰ Participant #011, Major, Focus Group, MCB Quantico, 16 August 2017.

Pregnant Marine Stereotypes and Realities

In the section about the everyday challenges of being a woman and a Marine, we talked about the stereotypes that female Marines face on a regular basis. Though not addressed in that section, another bundle of stereotypes they face are those associated with being pregnant in the Marine Corps. A persistent perception expressed by Marines who participated in this research is that female Marines use pregnancy as a way to get out of certain situations, such as deployments. A male sergeant illustrated this perception and suggested that it was one of the reasons that male Marines seem to resent female Marines.

But that's one little piece of the puzzle that that creates resentment toward women. You ever hear the phrase, "I'm up, they see me, I'm down?" ... I saw a picture online today a female Marine, I think at a rifle range, prone with a rifle, and it says, "I'm up, they see me, I'm pregnant." Yeah, I'm not giving you some kind of valuable and obscure insight that I had to tease out of the depths of our institution. It's something everyone just knows. I'm sure some of it is stereotypes. I'm sure some of it is perception that doesn't quite match up with reality. But the reality is absolutely there too.²⁰¹

Both male and female participants suggested that there was some truth to the stereotype. For instance, one female staff sergeant said, "[I]t's like there's this negative stigma against pregnant Marines, and unfortunately, I do see a lot of them milking it."²⁰² However, even for those who are not "milking it," participants explained that the stereotype of the conniving female Marine is something that impacts women in both personal and professional realms. Addressing the stereotype that all young female Marines get pregnant in the fleet, the same staff sergeant from above told this story about encountering and contesting the stereotype upon her entry to the fleet.

I remember when I first got the fleet, one of my sergeants told me, "Every single female Marine is either married or pregnant before she becomes a sergeant." And I was like, "I won't be." He's like, "Yeah, you will, especially 'cause you're older," 'cause I was 24 by the time I hit the fleet. He's like, "Especially 'cause you're older. You'll be married or pregnant before you pick up sergeant." And I actually made a bet with him for a sergeant's paycheck, [laughing] and I picked up sergeant. I wasn't married or pregnant still.²⁰³

This illustrates another insight, examined in more depth below. As with other stereotypes pertaining to gender, female Marines reported working hard to not live up to the stereotype. However, another Marine talked about how the perception that pregnancy is a deliberate move to get out of deployment is sometimes unavoidable and that women receive flack for getting pregnant no matter what.

And that's the part where even normal female Marines like me, I had to plan my children strategically. And get to this unit. Am I not playing? Okay, let's get pregnant. You have to do that. Because if you don't, it's like, "Oh, you got pregnant because you didn't want to get deployed." No, that's actually not it, because I'm getting close to 30. But you know, that's the thing in the Marine Corps. Everything is a choice. It's like, how popular do you want to be?²⁰⁴

²⁰¹ Participant #049, Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

²⁰² Participant #061, Staff Sergeant, Interview, MCAS Cherry Point, 24 August 2017.

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Participant #230, Captain, Interview, MCAS Yuma, 25 September 2017.

By asking “how popular do you want to be?”, this Marine was alluding to the backlash that many women deal with while being pregnant in the Corps.

Participants discussed how the perceived special treatment women receive during pregnancy raises hackles amongst peers and within the unit. Some Marines explained that this is in part due to the fact that a pregnant Marine poses a very real personnel conundrum: she gets lighter duty and maternity leave, and so others in her workplace must fill in the gaps. According to the Marines who participated in this research, there seems to be no official policy in place for how to deal with the staffing issues created by an excused absence, be it a pregnant Marine or a Marine who has been injured. Additionally, accommodating a Marine’s pregnancy also seems to be at odds with many participants’ perception of equality in the Marine Corps. A major said, “[M]e personally, I understand, and I’ve never had issues with Marines not being able to do certain things because they are pregnant. Unfortunately, I can’t say the same thing about people who have worked for me. ... We are taught at least in what I’ve seen in Marine Corps society, not Marine Corps but US society, there’s very much a sense of fair play and hence why favoritism bothers people.”²⁰⁵ A gunnery sergeant also articulated how the reality of a woman needing to take time off can rub some people the wrong way. At the end of this quote, however, she illustrates an alternative way of thinking about “picking up the slack” for “our sister in the Corps.”

But naturally women are the ones who get the stigma. I've heard certain Marines getting crap because as soon as you get pregnant, you're like, “Crap. Here comes the appointment, here comes the four months that you're not going to be there.” And again, I can see both sides, because if somebody is gone four months, you're not getting a replacement. And those other Marines have to pick up the slack. So, it's kind of like “ugh,” it's hard because it's ... You just have to have that environment where you were such a good worker that, “Hey, while she's gone, you know she's our sister in the Corps. We have to just help her. We help the office by picking up her slack.”²⁰⁶

Aware of the anger and disruption that pregnancy can produce – as well as of the perception that some women use pregnancy to cheat the system – many of the female Marines with whom we spoke tried to minimize their need for special accommodations during, before, and after pregnancy.

Not “That” Pregnant Marine

Not wanting to fulfill stereotypes of the lazy and manipulative female Marine, women reported that they often pushed themselves to the limit while pregnant or postpartum. The staff sergeant from above who made a bet that she would not get pregnant by the time she became a sergeant positioned herself in contrast to the stereotypical female Marine who “milks” her pregnancy. She described how, after she got pregnant, she pushed herself as hard as she could so that she would not fulfill stereotypes. She stated that she was miserable but did not complain as she worked late into her pregnancy.

I wanted to be the opposite of that. But I think in doing so, I might’ve made myself more miserable. I didn’t complain. I kept working out as much as I could. Generally, towards

²⁰⁵ Participant #068, Major, Interview, MCAS Cherry Point, 24 August 2017.

²⁰⁶ Participant #300, Gunnery Sergeant, Interview, MCB Quantico, 6 August 2017.

the end of your pregnancy, you work eight hour days, but most women get a half day. But I didn't get a half day. And then most women, too, by the end of their pregnancy, they tell them not to come to work anymore. I worked up until the day I pushed that baby out, and it was so miserable, and my boss, he was a grounds-side guy, 'cause I was on recruiting duty. He was a grounds-side guy, never worked with a female before, so I don't think he knew how to handle it. So he was doing everything exactly by the book, no special treatment.²⁰⁷

When asked by the interviewer if her boss could see that she was suffering, she said: "Yeah, 'cause I told [my boss and coworkers]. And then I couldn't sleep at all, either, so I was sleep-deprived, just like a zombie. And my coworkers were all like, 'This isn't right.' Even the ones who I didn't get along with very well, they're like, 'This isn't cool.'"²⁰⁸ Similarly, an officer talked about how one of her Marines confronted the stereotype of the lazy pregnant (or, in this case, postpartum) Marine, bringing up a potential double standard where men do not make PT because of their kids, but the female Marine who just had a kid is compelled to go.

That is a huge mentality thing with that too because we had PT, and like if you really can't make it, you don't come. We have guys who have kids. Their wives don't work, but they want to be there when their kids wake up in the morning, and they usually don't come to PT. Where we have a Marine, she just had a baby two weeks ago, she was showing up eight and a half months pregnant to PT because she was afraid of the perception she would set for everyone else.²⁰⁹

Pushing oneself to the limit can work to mitigate stereotypes associated with female Marines (though not always). For instance, another staff sergeant attributed her good experience with being pregnant in the Marine Corps with the fact that she "still showed up."

The second time [I was pregnant] ... I had 23 Marines under me. ... I still showed up for PT. Still played basketball and volleyball. Still tried to go for runs and things like that. I'd just do half the distance. [A]s long as you're around and you still care, my Marines didn't care that I was pregnant.²¹⁰

However, an unexamined area – and one outside of our purview as social science researchers – is whether this is good for the physical and mental health of female Marines. Setting an ambitious precedent for future female Marines to follow leaves little wiggle room. The "if she can do it, so can I" mentality has set the bar high for female Marines.

Policies on Pregnancy and Breastfeeding

The Marine Corps, which is used to the fit male body as its "universal" Marine, is experiencing challenges in having to accommodate bodies that can carry babies and lactate. While there are plans and policies in place for certain aspects of pregnancy (the 40-hour work week, for example), participants discussed that it is not a given that Marines are savvy and up-to-date on all pregnancy-related policies or that they will self-motivate to learn about the policies when needed. In other instances, policies are completely absent. As several Marines noted, this can be

²⁰⁷ Participant #061, Staff Sergeant, Interview, MCAS Cherry Point, 24 August 2017.

²⁰⁸ Ibid. She reported that, though her coworkers expressed concern, no one spoke up for her.

²⁰⁹ Participant #202, Major, Focus Group, MCB Quantico, 6 September 2017.

²¹⁰ Participant #216, Staff Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 13 September 2017.

an obstacle for pregnant women and their commands alike. A colonel illustrated this while talking about a situation that he had seen several times throughout his career in the Marine Corps: women coming into the Corps with no dependents and then getting pregnant. The issue here, according to the colonel, is that there is no set course of action for a single Marine who suddenly finds herself pregnant. He envisioned the experience of a Marine upon finding out she is pregnant and the negative way her command might respond.

“I was a single Marine now I’m not. ... So you know I’m gonna have dependents soon if I’m going to choose to keep the child. So I need to do something. And it’s different than what I did before. So I need to go back to MCCS and go through the process of checking into all the other places I didn’t check into. I need to go to the base and check in with all the other places and I should check into. ... But there is no checklist or guidance for me to help me when I’m losing my mind because I’m going to have a baby and I’m 18 and you know my mom was right, I am a slut.” Whatever it is, whatever is going on in their head, there’s not a lot of support for it. So there is, but they’re not connected to that support because suddenly, “I walked into my gunny and my gunny [says], ‘God dammit, you know [name removed per human subjects protection protocol], I told you not to do that.’” ... Busting her chops because – hopefully not, but maybe – because she’s supposed to deploy. Now it’s a problem, and we’ve got to move it back to a different unit to where she not deployable. I don’t know what kind of reception they’re getting down in the unit. Hopefully it’s supportive, but I don’t know that.²¹¹

An officer told the story of her miscarriage while sitting on a promotion board and the hostility she encountered. She noted that part of this hostility possibly stemmed from the fact that there is no *uniform* Marine Corps policy on miscarriage, and so the way she was treated after her miscarriage was left to the discretion those sitting with her on the promotion board, one of whom implied that she could not “handle it.”

I think the first challenge is the Marine Corps policy – before you even get to motherhood – on miscarriage. Let’s put the hard stuff out there. ... I sat on a promotion board literally, I was 20 weeks pregnant. Walked in, literally miscarried in the lobby of the hotel that night. Right? Two hours later, after I get out of the ER, I go into the board, the board president looks at me and said, “Well if you can’t handle it, I guess we’ll find somebody else, or we’ll see if we can do without you.” Okay, as a Marine, what your answer really is, “go F yourself,” but without saying [it]. “No, I’m fine. I got this.” Really? Is that how we treat our Marines? We have no policy on defining miscarriages. You can have a miscarriage nine months into it, you can even miscarriage two days into it. It’s still traumatic on you, it’s still traumatic on your partner, it’s traumatic on your body. Marine Corps doesn’t have a policy in writing, so there are many commanders that don’t know what to do with it. Did you gain weight during that? What if you are eight months into it and you miscarry? What’s the policy on when you have to take a PFT? What’s the policy on when you have to make weight? It’s one of those areas they just don’t want to touch.²¹²

She was interrupted by other participants who said that the policy says it is up to the commander, which was then followed by agreement among participants that this ambiguous policy further complicates matters.

²¹¹ Participant #617, Colonel, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 18 September 2017.

²¹² Participant #901, Lieutenant Colonel, Focus Group, MCB Quantico, 6 September 2017.

Participants discussed that even when there are policies in place, not all who are in command know about or enforce these policies. A sergeant told a secondhand account of a Marine who, according to him,

was not given any type of help with her pregnancy. There are certain orders in place to saying that you need to have a specific place where you can breastfeed. ... None of that was put in place, and she was getting shit every single day for having to go breastfeed or having to go pump.²¹³

In many cases, if these policies were heeded, the “disruption” caused by a woman having to pump might be minimized. A focus group participant talked about the awkwardness she encountered when she had to explain to her boss that she was pumping.

[E]verybody knew because I came here with a five-month-old. ... Immediately, I was slated to be a company commander. And my boss banging on my door while I'm trying to pump, right, to get food for my kid. And, “Sir, I'll be out in a minute.” Like, “Well, why is your door locked?” Then when you go explain to him like, “I had to pump because I've got this kid.”²¹⁴

Hostile, Awkward, and Accepting Environments

Participants explained that a women's experience with pregnancy in the Marine Corps is highly dependent on the atmosphere of her unit and the attitude of her leadership. For instance, a major posited that a women's experience with pregnancy in the Marine Corps is greatly shaped by her unit and the “ripple effect” that her pregnancy might create. She said, “When your peer has to deploy because you're pregnant this week, that definitely has a ripple effect and kind of can make for a negative experience.”²¹⁵ A chief warrant officer 3 explained how pregnancy impacted her inclusion into her unit, that her colleagues did not think it was necessary to include her in planning because she would be gone on maternity leave. “So, I'm standing here pregnant and [they] don't include you in the meetings that you would be [in]. They don't include you in the planning, that it affects your Marines and everything.”²¹⁶ In short, some Marines discussed being leery of young women because of the interruption that pregnancy might cause; in turn, some female Marines are aware of this leerness and plan accordingly, as discussed more below.

Some participants discussed how, even if a female is not pregnant, the mere fact that she can potentially become pregnant has an impact on her career. A focus group participant talked about her experience coming into a new unit as someone with a young baby:

We're a whole other level because they don't know what to do with that. Like, my boss literally, didn't know what to do with me. Coming ... with a nine-month-old and him wondering if I was going to have another baby or not and trying to figure out how to ask that question. He did ask me – it was awkward – what billet he should put me in because I'm going to be pregnant. Like that means that I'm not functional.²¹⁷

²¹³ Participant #308, Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 14 September 2017.

²¹⁴ Participant #322, Captain, Focus Group, MCB Camp Butler, 18 October 2017.

²¹⁵ Participant #305, Major, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 12 September 2017.

²¹⁶ Participant #208, Chief Warrant Officer 3, Interview, Pentagon, 7 September 2017.

²¹⁷ Participant #324, Major, Focus Group, MCB Camp Butler, 18 October 2017.

Similarly, a male staff sergeant talked about how pregnant women are sometimes negatively perceived coming into a new unit. He talked about a situation he experienced when he was leaving his unit and discussing his replacement, who was a female.

I've had a situation not too long ago having a personal conversation with a very senior enlisted Marine. So male staff sergeant being replaced by a younger female sergeant who also happens to be pregnant, and the shit that came out of his mouth. As soon as she checked in I had to pull her aside and say, pretty much tell her to watch out for this incredibly influential male senior enlisted Marine. He has made clear his perceptions.²¹⁸

Participants also talked about how the perception of what women can and cannot do if they are pregnant shapes the course a female Marine's career. A master gunnery sergeant described a situation in which he tried to send one of his pregnant Marines – who seemed ideal in all regards except for being pregnant – to a PME course, and his command became angry when they found out, declaring, "It's a risk we don't want." He explained his reaction, saying,

I would understand if the Marine was overweight or hasn't been PTing. I was like, "she's PTing on her own right now." She PT'd on her own up to the last freaking week before she gave birth, you know. I mean, so, and I have a Marine that wants to go. And they were criticizing Marines not going to PME. I'm like, "I have a Marine that's wants to go." Medical saying yes, the schoolhouse says, as long as the command signs off on it, we'll take her. ... So, my boss was extremely pissed, and it was one of those things that, you know, the timing of it. Because we even mentioned like, maybe you need to put an EO complaint and all that. But then because of the timing of it, and the way it would have gone up, it would have bypassed her report date. And then she would have to wait until the next class. So, basically, she never went to PME. Now, they were like, "Well, we could wait until she gets back after her maternity." I was like, "But that means her giving birth, her trying to get back into shape." And got it, I'm quite sure she could get back into shape. ... It was upsetting, really upsetting. Because once again, we don't stop male Marines because their wives are pregnant from going to PME.²¹⁹

Some participants had good experiences with pregnancy in the Marine Corps but noted that these experiences were rare and that they had prepared themselves for a bad experience beforehand. The lieutenant colonel from above talked about revealing her pregnancy to her commander as a single mom.

I was [a] divorced mom ... and it was one of those things where I walked into my boss and said, "Sir, I am pregnant, and I know what the Marine Corps' opinion of this is going to be, and I don't really care. I am financially stable, I am emotionally stable, I have the resources, and I'm not terminating this pregnancy because of the Marine Corps." Right? And I luckily at that time had a great commander who said, "It's none of anybody's damn business." So, the way it was handled was appreciated, but that's rare, right?²²⁰

Similarly, a captain told the story of joining a new unit and having to tell her commander that she might want to be a mom someday soon. She expected negative career impacts because of her

²¹⁸ Participant #522, Staff Sergeant, Focus Group, MCAS Yuma, 26 September 2017.

²¹⁹ Participant #321, Master Gunnery Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Butler, 18 October 2017.

²²⁰ Participant #901, Lieutenant Colonel, Focus Group, MCB Quantico, 6 September 2017.

admission, but in fact got just the opposite. She said that her commander told her, “Don't wait on the Marine Corps because the Marine Corps is never going to give you a good opportunity to be a mother.” She said he reiterated that he would not remove her from command and told her to do what she could. She concluded, “It was so incredibly motivating to have someone just believe in you that way. I was determined not to let him down.”²²¹

Shifting Perspectives on Pregnancy

Pregnancy and breastfeeding are often perceived negatively and feed into the potential for female Marine parents to be marginalized. Even in broader society, pregnant and breastfeeding bodies are hardly perceived as normal and commonplace. Aligning the stigma surrounding female biological functions and female Marine stereotypes with the idea that the smaller percentage of women in the Marine Corps makes female Marines’ “mistakes” and differences more visible, a major noted,

There's no fucking way that enough male Marines have interacted with enough female Marines for them to understand what it is they bring and how they're not really that different. Are there shitty females who are malingerers, who get pregnant to get out of deployments and who are barracks hoes or whatever? Yeah. Of course there are. Are there shitty dudes who are the equivalent? Yes, of course, there are. But because they are a smaller portion of the population, they are much more visible when they do screw up, and that's part of the problem. If they were 40, 50 percent of the population, I don't even think we'd be having this conversation, or it'd be a different one.²²²

Certainly, the fact that female Marines – let alone *pregnant* Marines – are so rare contributes to pregnant and breastfeeding Marines’ being met with confusion, and that can lead to hostility. However, the perception that pregnancy and motherhood make women weak and a burden is just that – a perception. According to a male master sergeant in a focus group, this is a perception that can be changed.

My Marines tried to tell me that females get different treatment. But that's their perception, that they get different treatment. And so you ask, how do you deal with it? You got to deal with it on your level and just like I said, when I explained to them like, “Man, this chick is out here doing everything you do. She's better than you. Don't try to say she's getting preferential treatment cause she's better than you. No, she gave birth and then came back and was still better than you.”²²³

²²¹ Participant #235, Captain, Interview, MCAS Yuma, 26 September 2017.

²²² Participant #126, Major, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 19 September 2017.

²²³ Participant #236, Master Sergeant, Focus Group, MCAS Yuma, 26 September 2017.

PART VI: Remaining a Marine: How Enlisted and Officers Deliberate and Decide

Some Marines did not know what they were getting themselves into when they joined, and most do not find it easy to choose to leave. Marines who deeply believe in Marine Corps values may become disillusioned in their peers and leaders. Even still, many Marines adjust. Those who do often stay in. In some extreme cases, Marines find that they can no longer fit into the institution or are no longer willing to try.

Marines who participated in this research discussed their complex deliberations and motivations for staying in or leaving the Marine Corps. This section addresses the following aspects of participants' decisions to stay or to leave:

- 1) When new to the Marine Corps, Marines may expect an austere lifestyle and combat deployments and be disappointed when daily life is easy or boring.
- 2) Marines have high standards for their leaders and peers. When leaders fail to strive for or achieve these standards, it creates problems both acute and chronic.
- 3) Increased exposure to the institution and other Marines can lead some officers and enlisted to become disillusioned. When this occurs, some are able to adjust and stay in; others lose confidence and get out.
- 4) Marines describe how their love and commitment to the Corps conflicts with numerous, sometimes equally positive, reasons for ending active service. The final choice to get out may be difficult, if not agonizing.

We will start with the Marine experience after successfully transitioning out of recruit training and MCT. For enlisted and prior enlisted participants, this was the most common time when enlisted Marines became disillusioned with the Marine Corps. A few officers also became disillusioned, though not consistently at any one stage in their careers. Both enlisted and officers expressed deep disappointment when their peers or leaders violated Marine Corps values. This is not a surprise, given the institutional emphasis on honor, courage, and commitment. Whatever the reason for separating, most Marines getting out described a difficult decision making process, which we will describe in detail.

After joining the Marine Corps: Is this what I signed up for?

Enlisted Perspectives

Enlisted and prior enlisted Marines described the disconnect between their perception of the Corps prior to entry and the reality once within the ranks. Some participants explained they joined because of the physical feats and values promoted in the media and in Marine Corps advertisements. They reported being captivated by a heroic version of being a Marine. One corporal explained,

I think a lot of people would join because we like the ideals and the values that it stood for. You saw those commercials – everyone standing strong, marching in step ... like in the

movies and in TV, and everyone's a hero, and the Americans always win at the end, or they die trying.²²⁴

Typically, entry level recruit or officer training reinforces this idealistic view. But later, some participants experienced what this corporal called "disillusionment."²²⁵ A prior enlisted Marine who is currently a lieutenant described it as a slow process of discovery as he progressed through the first stages of enlistment. He talked about "all those things that you learn in recruit training" and how "it lessens a little bit on MCT because they're like, 'oh, we don't do that here.' And then you go to MOS school, like 'oh, we don't do that here.' And then you get to the fleet. ... all they hear is 'we don't do that here. We don't do that here. That's not what we do here.'"²²⁶

Other than this type of adjustment, other Marines discussed having to adjust to a job or working environment that was not what they had anticipated. One master sergeant described his reaction early in his career this way.

And then I'd say fast forward, got to my first unit. Six months being there, I was like, "Yeah, this is not, not what I signed up to do. Absolutely not." The picture the Marine Corps puts off is, "We're over there ... kicking ass. And day-to-day life is not kicking ass. You're doing all kinds of other different things, and I'm like, "This is definitely not what I signed up for."²²⁷

Logically speaking, all Marines cannot be door-kicking infantry. Nevertheless, the consistent public image of Marines in combat can lead some individuals to be disappointed. One PFC said he enjoyed being a legal services specialist, but he was nevertheless surprised that there was not "more going out into the field."²²⁸ A lieutenant said this realization has had a demoralizing effect on some of his junior Marines. "You have the people that are frustrated by that, and they get beaten down by the fact that ... they're not doing what they signed up to do, and they are very disappointed in that."²²⁹ An officer described this lack of a sense of purpose of his junior Marines, in part due to the lack of combat operations, as one of his biggest challenges as a leader.

That's the biggest leadership struggle right now in the Marine Corps I think is— when you have a sense of purpose, you don't think about committing suicide. When you have a sense of purpose, you don't just sit in your barracks room and drink your troubles away. Now granted, that doesn't mean that's all gone when we go to combat or constantly the op tempo is super high. There's other stressors that come in. But right now, there's just a whole lot of, "I don't want to be here anymore. This isn't what I signed up for. I'm kind of done with this."²³⁰

In contrast to what some Marine Corps advertisements portray, most Marines will spend little to no time in a combat environment. Some Marines, like the PFC, enjoy what they end up doing. Others, like the master sergeant, stay in regardless of the disappointment. Nevertheless, this

²²⁴ Participant #052, Corporal, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ Participant #507, 1st Lieutenant, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 13 September 2017.

²²⁷ Participant #020, Master Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 22 August 2017.

²²⁸ Participant #039, Private First Class, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

²²⁹ Participant #048, 1st Lieutenant, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

²³⁰ Participant #016, Captain, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 22 August 2017.

realization can result in a decrease of motivation that the individual – and possibly Marine leadership – must address.

Aside from combat, advertisements employing the familiar tagline “the few, the proud, the Marines” promote the idea of membership into an elite community.²³¹ A sergeant described how he believed what the Marine Corps espoused on its recruiting posters until after he joined. That is when he became disappointed by individual Marines. At first, he blamed the institution for false advertising. Eventually, he realized that it was his choice to uphold Marine Corps values and lead the way for other Marines.

The difference is night and day between all that entry level stuff where you're yelling, you're motivated, you're hearing about core values– and then you get to the fleet, and you meet the Marines who are, excuse my Marine Corps language, “shit bags.” So personally, there was a sure crisis of faith where I thought, “Okay, well, I guess core values are a bumper sticker or a recruiting poster.” ... Later on, I decided it doesn't work that way. You don't show up, and you're all of a sudden surrounded by all those values. You have to live them. If you do, then the Marine Corps does. The Marine Corps is made of Marines. Not rifles, not tanks. It's made out of Marines. It's made of people. So if the people act that way, then the recruiting posters are telling the truth. The more of us act that way, the better.²³²

This sergeant and other Marines accepted that the Marine Corps is not entirely populated with highly principled individuals and that it is also not solely about combat deployments. Some Marines who discovered that the reality is not the ideal were able to adjust and stay in. In the future, a more in-depth analysis of our data may yield actionable information about what facilitates this type of adjustment. Meanwhile, a few Marines said they were unable to get over their disappointment with the Marine Corps and have decided to separate. The decision to leave the Marine Corps, however, was rarely cut-and-dry for participants. This will be discussed below.

Officer Perspectives

Like enlisted Marines, officers described a disconnect between their perception of the Marine Corps, its values, and those who lead Marines prior to joining and the reality once they came aboard. Officer participants discussed their disappointment in individuals who fell short of the institution's values. One complaint was about senior level officers who have been promoted despite appearing to be “worthless,”²³³ as detailed in the section about why there are bad leaders. One major recounted how a Marine general gave a “reckless response”²³⁴ to a junior Marine during an all-hands brief. He questioned why this high-ranking Marine would take time “beating his chest in front of everybody” instead of answering “a serious question.”²³⁵ Other high-ranking officers appeared to mishandle questions in relation to the Marines United misbehavior, as

²³¹ In 2016, news reports indicated that this tagline may be retired, though advertisements since then employed the phrase. See <https://www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/your-marine-corps/2017/03/30/marines-are-once-again-the-few-the-proud/>.

²³² Participant #049, Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

²³³ Participant #215, Chief Warrant Officer 3, MCB Camp Pendleton, 13 September 2017.

²³⁴ Participant #114, Major, MCB Camp Pendleton, 12 September 2017.

²³⁵ Ibid.

described earlier in this report. Unsurprisingly, officers were especially disgusted by egregious violations of Marine Corps values, such as the Marine colonel found guilty of sexual abuse of minors. His case was settled while we were collecting the data, so it was fresh on the minds of several of the officers during interviews and focus groups. Though few Marines ever commit such grave crimes, a major pointed out that the colonel had a successful career, despite earlier warning signs. “We say we want people of character, but ... that colonel down at II MEF – wasn’t the first time he got caught doing something! Those people are very present in our organization.”²³⁶

Marine officers were also disappointed to learn that they were not held to the standard they anticipated. For instance, a major started to realize at TBS that Marines are expected to meet a “good enough” standard, which has persisted throughout his career.

I was surprised that the quality of the instruction wasn't better given the quality of the instructors, if that makes sense. There was a lot more “shut up and color,” “stay with the lines”- type mentality, which you might need for second lieutenants, and I can kind of understand that. But there wasn't a lot of emphasis on individual thought, critical analysis, which is fine ‘cause ... you don't want a lieutenant who's gonna spend their time thinking. You want a lieutenant who’s going to act and to be able to gauge a situation just well enough to make a good enough decision. I'm kind of learning that over the course of my career is the military isn't about getting the perfect solution, it's about getting the good enough solution for whatever the problem is.²³⁷

Why Marines Leave

Marines who discussed separation told us that the decision to leave the Marine Corps was a difficult one. Typically, there are pull factors, such as a more lucrative job, education, and spending more time with family or starting one. A common push factor discussed by Marines can be summarized as a feeling of abandonment or ill-ease with the institution. The more extreme examples of institutional abandonment will be discussed later.

*A Captain’s Deliberations*²³⁸

We begin with a Marine officer who still “genuinely love(s) the institution” but has decided to separate. Her story is an example of the kind of deliberations over which an individual can agonize. She wanted to give more to the Corps but had to account for the toll the Marine Corps and its operational tempo had already taken on her family, not to mention her body.

This married female captain had been assigned to the Pentagon for the past few years. She anticipated her next duty station would be in Okinawa. Her father died in the last year, which was one of the many aspects of her family life on her mind. “I’m an only child, and I lost my dad, and now if I’m in Okinawa and something happens to my mom, no one is here.” She also considered the impact her move would have on her husband’s new civilian career. He had

²³⁶ Participant #203, Major, Focus Group, MCB Quantico, 06 September 2017.

²³⁷ Participant #126, Major, Interview, MCACGG Twentynine Palms, 19 September 2017.

²³⁸ Participant #606, Captain, Interview, Pentagon, 6 September 2017.

recently separated from the Marine Corps and graduated from law school, “and he has five offers to giant law firms, and I don’t want to get moved to Okinawa and not allow him to pursue that next step of his life.” She did not feel her monitor would give her any special consideration, especially since she had seen a friend get orders to go to Okinawa despite the fact that her friend’s husband was in the middle of his medical retirement board. She understood the needs of the Corps take precedence, and yet she could not help but wish that a conversation exploring win-win options were possible. She explained, “I don’t want the Marine Corps to change for me. I do not want the Marine Corps to change for me. But if it’s hell bent on changing for me and people like me, or to have more people like me, then it needs to be willing to have harder conversations [about its culture].” In addition to both of these family considerations, she was also considering her age and her desire to have children. A deployment to Okinawa would delay that possibility for another three years.

In addition to the pull her family exerted, the new PFT standards were a push factor for her. Other male and female Marines who had eight years (or more) time in service described a similar reaction to the requirements.²³⁹ She said, “I went overnight from being an exceptional Marine officer to being above average Marine officer.” This was because, even after a year of working with a personal trainer, she could complete only four pull-ups. “I lost 30 points on my PFT. That’s one of the only quantitative measures we have, and it’s something that people go to right away. So it doesn’t matter what else I’m doing, that’s one of the things that they’re going to key on.” This did not conform to her desire to perform to the highest standard that she and others expected. In addition to the PFT changes, this captain anticipated that the Marine Corps’ decision to integrate women into the infantry would negatively impact her development as a leader. Her MOS community was one that had more female leaders, but she anticipated her access to female mentors and leadership would be diluted as they were moved to fill newly opened billets.

Enlisted Perspectives

Earlier we discussed officers who lost confidence in their senior leaders. Enlisted Marines also discussed losing confidence in leadership, and this appears to be a prominent reason they decide not to re-enlist. Some discussed weighing their current situation against the possibility that, in their next four years, they may be assigned to a worse unit. One corporal approximated the odds at 50-50 that his next unit would have worse leadership than his current unit. He decided to end active service.²⁴⁰ He was not alone in his belief that poor leaders are as common as good ones. One sergeant joined the Marine Corps because he expected he would finally be with other “misfits” of society who maintained their personal integrity even if at a cost. Since then, he witnessed Marine leaders who “cut corners.”²⁴¹ Based on what he saw in his first seven years, he concluded there is little hope for the future.

I wouldn't want to be underneath leadership that I didn't respect for an entire four years, and this is a ... high possibility. I wouldn't want to be [under] leadership where I'm trying to do the right thing, they want me to do the wrong thing. And as I'm telling the Marines

²³⁹ See the section above on PFT/CFT scores for further discussion of the PFT standards.

²⁴⁰ Participant #636, Corporal, Interview, MCAS Yuma, 25 September 2017.

²⁴¹ Participant #615, Sergeant, Interview, Camp Pendleton, 14 September 2017

to do the right thing, they're telling the Marines to do the wrong thing, and they're above me. You know?²⁴²

A PFC explained that he also was unlikely to stay in beyond four years because of poor leadership, which he also does not anticipate will improve. “No one wants to be a part of a group that hazes you and then expects you to just be fine with that person a couple months later. Or you can't ask people to stick around to an organization that's going to treat you like garbage and then not take care of you in the long run.”²⁴³ Participants reported that if Marines are unlucky enough to have bad leaders early in their career, they may not be willing to risk another four-year commitment in the hope of change. This dynamic of who gets in and who gets out is also explored in an earlier section of this report on bad leadership.

To Stay or Leave after Sexual Assault

This section addresses the perspectives of three enlisted women who experienced sexual assault that was reported and investigated in the recent or distant past – a master sergeant, a sergeant, and a corporal. A common denominator in all three stories, and a primary reason the younger women provided for leaving, was poor leadership. The master sergeant recounted that she was sexually assaulted as a lance corporal and that her command's response left her disappointed. Even though the assault was two decades ago, she became emotional as she described being disregarded by her commanding officer at the time. She received orders to move to a different unit, and her CO did not explain why. “I was that young lance corporal, and I decided to just keep going. But, there's certain people within the Corps that – they just don't [sniffles, crying] – they just don't take care of you. And they just push you to the side ...”²⁴⁴ Despite still being angry with how the Marine Corps treated her, she stayed in.

The sergeant was sexually assaulted a few years ago in Okinawa. She did not report the incident at all because she did not want the pity or the awkwardness at work. However, another individual told a family readiness officer, making it unrestricted. Among her leadership, “nobody took me seriously.”²⁴⁵ She anticipated better leadership in her next duty station, and she was receiving psychological counseling, so she stayed in. However, the respect she was seeking did not materialize.

I'm just tired of it. I'm tired of being treated like I don't matter. ... Even here [in my new unit], dealing with the guys that talk down to you. Well, guess what? I dealt with that [in Okinawa], and I smiled and dealt with it, and I wasn't taken seriously. I almost kind of am in a personal conflict where it's just like, “Okay, [the Marine Corps] no longer is supportive for me.”²⁴⁶

The corporal also was sexually assaulted. Like the sergeant, the corporal explained she has had her fill of being ignored and undervalued. Both she and her husband, a Marine who is also ending active service, arrived at the conclusion that the price of staying in is too high.

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Participant #021, Private First Class, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 22 August 2017.

²⁴⁴ Participant #643, Master Sergeant, Interview, MCB Quantico, 3 October 2017.

²⁴⁵ Participant #601, Sergeant, Interview, Pentagon, 6 September 2017.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

I feel like I have a lot more to give to the Marine Corps, but ... I respect myself and my family too much to allow the Marine Corps, the people within the Marine Corps, to hurt me or my family any more than they already have. ... I'm not doing this anymore, neither is my husband. I'm taking my ball and my bat and I'm going home. [*laughs*] The Marine Corps doesn't value me. The Marine Corps values the sergeant that sexually assaulted me, that will bring more recruits and poolees into the Marine Corps. Why? Because he is a great PFT and a great CFT, and he looks like that white kid from Kansas.²⁴⁷

Given how difficult assault can be both physically and emotionally, the fact that these women mentioned any desire to stay in the Marine Corps may be surprising. On the other hand, commitment is a foundational Marine Corps value that attracts men and women to become Marines in the first place. The accounts in this section illustrate a conflict of values Marines experienced during their enlistment or careers. These final stories demonstrate the deepest of conflicts. During the assault and afterward, Marine peers and leaders fell short of their commitment to respect their fellow Marine. Despite these negative experiences, the women stayed committed to the Marine Corps; they did not immediately exit. This came later, after an internal reckoning where they realized their respect for the institution was greater than the respect they received from its leaders.

²⁴⁷ Participant #309, Corporal, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 14 September 2017.

PART VII: Cohesion, Leadership, and Difference through the Lens of Humor

Does the Marine Corps have a problem? Cohesion, leadership, and gender bias (and more broadly, difference) are not siloed topics that can be examined in isolation. They involve interconnected social processes that warrant holistic representation. In this section, we look at cohesion, leadership, and difference using the theme of humor to illustrate the complexity of the issues revealed when seeking to better understand if the Corps does in fact have a problem. Marines had much to say about how humor bridges and divides and how leaders can affect humor's impact on the unit and the individual. Marines recognize humor's power and, unfortunately, at times wield it in disrespectful, hurtful ways that have both organizational and individual negative outcomes. It boils down to being respectful and inspired leadership, but as you will read, it is simple to say, far more difficult to do, especially in a "melting pot" organization like the Marine Corps.

*A Marine comes in no matter what their background is ... expecting to be treated with respect, dignity, fairness.*²⁴⁸

~ Sergeant, Pentagon

In the quotation above, the sergeant was answering a question about the boundaries of humor. His answer began with the expectation of respect. However, he recognized that that is tricky when it comes to humor. "That's [the] line ... but ... that might be too vague when it comes ... to the specific situation of somebody making a comment or a joke and knowing what that line is."²⁴⁹ Humor is a complex social process that individuals use in myriad ways. While not a specific line of inquiry at the outset of the project, the theme frequently emerged during discussions about cohesion, leadership, and bad behavior. When it came up, researchers explored the topic more deeply with participants.²⁵⁰ For the Marines with whom we spoke, humor served several purposes and had varying impact. This discussion on humor does not cover all the ways humor displayed in the data or all of the social processes involved; however, these themes stood out:

- 1) Humor is vital to cohesion.
- 2) Humor can be a sign of trust between group members.
- 3) Humor is a boundary-building tool. Determining in-group boundaries is challenged by the continual movement of people into and out of units because trust takes time to build up within a group. Within a group that has established trust and respect, the boundaries for the group and for the individuals can be more flexible. When boundaries are crossed accidentally, members can recover due to that trust.

²⁴⁸ Participant #106, Sergeant, Interview, Pentagon, 7 September 2017.

²⁴⁹ Ibid.

²⁵⁰ It is important to note that, while most of the joking and comments below involved identity factors of minority, "other" populations in the Marine Corps, not all examples did; therefore, this is not exclusively an "other" issue. Each individual is unique with their own boundaries and expects those to be respected within their professional environment.

- 4) Humor can also be used to ridicule, to isolate, and to dominate. When people are afraid of change, insecure in their jobs, or angry at or prejudiced against others for whatever reason, they can strike out in masked humor.
- 5) The role of leadership is key to creating a professional environment that accounts for the need for Marines' dark humor and the critical role humor plays in uniting people and that also creates a safe space for all members.
- 6) Leadership sometimes creates hostile or permissive environments in perpetuating or permitting certain forms of humor.
- 7) People respond to inappropriate humor in different ways. Those targeted by bad jokes can be silenced, frustrated, emboldened to fight back, or exhausted to the point of separation.

Humor Fosters Cohesion

Marines discussed how humor helps foster and maintain cohesion among colleagues and within units. Several Marines explained how they use humor to test the waters when new to the Marine Corps or a unit. For example, a PFC in a focus group at MCB Camp Butler explained,

So for me it's that when I got here, I was really afraid to talk to anybody because I really don't know them and I don't know how they gonna to react to me. So, it's very similar to how people always say you test the water. That's basically what I did at first. I always try to make joke around, and I see how each of them ... react to it. And then I start making friends ... based on that reaction to how they do it.²⁵¹

Two other Marines in this focus group discussed how joking breaks down barriers and allows people to get to know each better.

*PFC K:*²⁵² I feel like when you joke about other people's cultures with them, it kind of like takes away the little barrier between the two cultures. ...

*LCpl M:*²⁵³ And then you actually put the joking aside ... and then you really start to learn to connect with these dudes because you all joined the Marine Corps for some reason and then so there's like at least a 90 percent chance that you're going to have something in common.

Marines described good cohesion or relationships through the ability to joke with one another. One Marine noted, "as time went on, I became more and more friendly with them, got to know them better, ... at work joking around with them."²⁵⁴ Another offered,

we have a beach bash, we'd have a BBQ, we'd have a bake sale to raise money where everybody could kind of bid as to who wanted the favorite desserts. And it got to a point where it's like "hey, so and so's wife, man, that carrot cake she made last time, I want that." But it was fun 'cause you could always laugh and joke. And the staff NCOs and other people would joke together like "hey man, I'll give you 20 bucks if your wife makes me another carrot cake like that." ... but you had that camaraderie, you know?²⁵⁵

²⁵¹ Participant #260, Private First Class, Focus Group, MCB Camp Butler, 17 October 2017.

²⁵² Participant #262, Private First Class, Focus Group, MCB Camp Butler, 17 October 2017.

²⁵³ Participant #261, Lance Corporal, Focus Group, MCB Camp Butler, 17 October 2017

²⁵⁴ Participant #060, Lance Corporal, Interview, MCAS Cherry Point, 24 August 2017.

²⁵⁵ Participant #013, Gunnery Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 22 August 2017.

Being able to have fun together and being light hearted with each other are key to group formation and maintenance. A Marine explained,

I think a lot of it has to do with like sense of humor, how people make jokes or what people find funny, ends up being a big thing. Yeah, I would say like that actually strikes me as probably the biggest way that people form groups. Like if you don't think someone's funny, then you're going to distance yourself from them because you need things to laugh at.²⁵⁶

Humor Cultivates Trust

For the Marines who participated in the research, being able to joke with each other is a sign of trust. While establishing this trust takes time, once it is there, Marines discussed how that gave them the freedom to poke fun at each other, insult each other, and say things that may be deemed inappropriate by others because they trust and know each other. One Marine offered, “guys, I think, give each a hard time. Just for fun.”²⁵⁷ Another Marine explained, “being able to insult each other is a huge part of actually having unit cohesion. ... I mean if you can't make fun of each other, then you can't be honest with each other.”²⁵⁸ An African American Marine gave an example of how trust affords the ability to make fun in ways that otherwise would be inappropriate. He explained that it requires that you know someone really, really well.

If we're all in a room, where like, “yeah, dude.” It's like, “Yeah, I saw [*name removed per human subjects protection protocol*] eating chicken the other day,” and I'm there laughing because [*laughs*] ... It's like, “you saw [*name removed per human subjects protection protocol*] eating chicken the other day,” and I was like, “of course, he's eating chicken.” ... But we only do that to people that we very well know very, very well. We're not literally, with most of them, most of the leadership would not basically do that to Marines that they don't know.²⁵⁹

Some Marines think that no one should get hurt or offended by such humor because they know the speaker does not really mean anything by it and that it is just harmless ribbing between trusted colleagues.

I think like the vocabulary and like the way that Marines talk is just so out there that like, we don't see it as a problem, and I see it as comfortability. That's why I like it. Everyone is so comfortable that nobody gets offended by what other people say. So that's one thing that's actually really cool 'cause there's a lot of like phrases, jokes, or like gender jokes or whatever, whatever religious but nobody takes it seriously because everyone knows that nobody actually thinks that way.²⁶⁰

Another Marine explained when discussing the diversity of ethnic and personal backgrounds of his unit, “[the diversity] becomes part of the culture like, it becomes a joke, you know. It's not... and that's not a bad thing. There's nothing derogatory about it. It's all in good fun.”²⁶¹

²⁵⁶ Participant #326, 1st Lieutenant, Interview, MCB Camp Butler, 19 October 2017.

²⁵⁷ Participant #209, Captain, Interview, Pentagon, 7 September 2017.

²⁵⁸ Participant #016, Captain, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 22 August 2017.

²⁵⁹ Participant #042, Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

²⁶⁰ Participant #264, Corporal, Focus Group, MCB Camp Butler, 18 October 2017.

²⁶¹ Participant #401, Captain, Interview, MCB Quantico, 7 September 2017.

Participants did, however, note that to be a Marine, one needs to have tough skin. “Really thick skin is the key to success probably in anybody’s community,”²⁶² explained one Marine. Another informed that this was something she was taught at boot camp. “Like all my drill instructors, they told you that, like ‘you gotta get over it. You gotta develop a thick skin.’”²⁶³ One female Marine went so far as to say, “The culture is kind of like, take the joke or you're not part of us. ... If you're not thick-skinned, then you're not a Marine.”²⁶⁴

Negotiating Social Boundaries with Humor

This last statement touches on how humor is used to draw boundaries of inclusion and exclusion in social groups. The issue of boundaries and how Marines determine the boundaries of permissible humor came up many times. One important factor of which Marines spoke is the need to recognize that Marine humor is dark, so outsiders may not understand or appreciate how Marines joke with each other or what they think is funny. As one Marine explained, “We don’t have normal conversations in the military. Our humor is dark ‘cause we have a dark path ahead of us. So we make jokes about things to lighten the mood and kinda reduce how bad things are.”²⁶⁵ Such humor is typical in professions where there is high stress.²⁶⁶ Typically, these jokes do not translate well outside of the profession. One lance corporal explained, “Like when I’m with my civilian friends, I can’t tell them jokes ‘cause they won’t understand how it’s funny.”²⁶⁷ Therefore, when discussing boundaries and what is appropriate, one should keep that in mind.

Many Marines who participated in the research discussed the intricate art of negotiating boundaries. As humor is individual and interpreted differently by different groups of people and the Marine Corps is “this big melting pot of people,”²⁶⁸ figuring out what is okay and not okay is not that easy. As one Marine explained, “what you think is funny, I may not think is funny.”²⁶⁹ Another explained,

I don't feel like everything should be off limits. I think that there's a lot that needs to be off limits for sure, and it's ... difficult to figure out where that line is so that you can have a good working relationship where people get along. People have no problem working with each other, even having a diverse group of individuals I do believe it also pertains to – what type of Marines do you have? What is their threshold for jokes? And ... that is not easily figured out right away. You get a brand-new Marine in here? It can be, whether it be a black Marine or a female or whatever, everybody's got different tolerances and what they accept is as good humor versus crossing a line.²⁷⁰

²⁶² Participant #110, Captain, Focus Group, MCB Camp Pendleton, 12 September 2017.

²⁶³ Participant #224, Lance Corporal, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 20 September 2017.

²⁶⁴ Participant #223, Lance Corporal, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 20 September 2017.

²⁶⁵ Participant #221, Sergeant, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 18 September 2017.

²⁶⁶ See, for example, John Joseph Coughlin, III, "Gallows Humor and its use among Police Officers." Dissertation, James Madison University, May 2002.

²⁶⁷ Participant #223, Lance Corporal, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 20 September 2017.

²⁶⁸ Participant #061, Staff Sergeant, Interview, MCAS Cherry Point, 24 August 2017.

²⁶⁹ Participant #044, Master Sergeant, Focus Group, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

²⁷⁰ Participant #310, Gunnery Sergeant, Interview, MCAS Yuma, 25 September 2017.

Many participants perceive that most Marines understand that and adjust their comments and behavior accordingly once they are aware of the problem. As one staff sergeant noted, “it’s a learning experience with every single person you interact with.”²⁷¹ Another staff sergeant added, “You have to understand your audience. So ... I have a Marine who’s an orphan. Not gonna be like, ‘go call your mom.’ He doesn’t have a mom. ... Or somebody’s dad just recently died, you’re not gonna be like, a dad joke. Or if somebody’s a widow, you’re not gonna go and make a death joke.”²⁷²

Also, several Marines discussed how Marines, recognizing a boundary crossing, quickly apologized for that, even if the target of the comment was not offended. For example, a lance corporal offered,

The other day at PT ... we were holding planks. And I guess the guys were dropping, I'm the only female in the group, ... and the sergeant was like, “Get your dicks off the deck!” And like after saying that, he’s like, “Except for you. Uh uh uh, s-sorry.” And you know, and ... I didn't say anything because I was planking. I was exhausted. Anyway, and we got up and as soon as we got back up, I just keep running. And he was like, “Uh, I'm really sorry. I didn't mean to say that, I didn't mean ... If-if I offended you, please let me know.” And I was like, “It's okay. It's the Marine Corps. I get it. I'm good.”²⁷³

Several Marines did note that there is individual responsibility to help Marines understand their personal boundaries. For example, one of the staff sergeants above explained, “They don’t necessarily know when it’s too far, and if I don’t tell them, they’re never gonna know.”²⁷⁴ Another Marine stated, “If I was insulting you and you got offended, like, alright, I’m a reasonable dude. Talk to me, let me know. That’s a line we won’t cross anymore.”²⁷⁵ This is where trust becomes a key factor as does the environment in which the Marines find themselves.

When Humor Crosses the Line

Unfortunately, for many Marines in the research project, especially those considered “minority” in the Marine Corps, the way humor displays for them creates permissive or hostile environments that impact both their professional and personal lives. As a female gunnery sergeant noted, “I think there’s a line, and I think we always cross that line like way off the deep end.”²⁷⁶ Some say, like this African American male sergeant, that Marines should accept this if they want to be in the Corps. “To be properly accepted sometimes, it does take sacrifice, ... and it's not just for female. That would be for anybody. ... People would make religious jokes, people would make race jokes.”²⁷⁷ A female sergeant countered his thinking by questioning how much she has to endure to belong. When asked if there is any role for humor in building cohesion, she responded, “well, sure, but at what expense?”²⁷⁸ revealing that people do get hurt

²⁷¹ Participant #216, Staff Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 13 September 2017.

²⁷² Participant #272, Staff Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Butler, 19 October 2017.

²⁷³ Participant #224, Lance Corporal, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 20 September 2017.

²⁷⁴ Participant #216, Staff Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 13 September 2017.

²⁷⁵ Participant #221, Sergeant, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 18 September 2017.

²⁷⁶ Participant #218, Gunnery Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 14 September 2017.

²⁷⁷ Participant #050, Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 September 2017.

²⁷⁸ Participant #601, Sergeant, Interview, Pentagon, 6 September 2017.

and offended. Many Marines who participated in the research provided examples of inappropriate and disrespectful jokes and humorous comments and some examples of humor excusing or condoning bad behavior that did have negative impacts on them or others. This section will just offer a glimpse into the types of situations Marines are encountering.²⁷⁹

There are several examples of people couching cruelty in the form of humor. For example, one corporal of Afghan heritage described a situation she encountered during a safety brief. A gunnery sergeant came into the briefing and made a joke (no details offered). “Someone was like, ‘Hey, that’s not funny,’ and then his response to that person, who was a lieutenant, was ‘Don’t worry about me and so-and-so, speaking to me. Don’t worry about me and her because her uncle and I go way back. I shot him in Afghanistan.’”²⁸⁰ A female sergeant gave this example, “I said something about my grandma passing away, and then one of the Marines in my shop laughed about it, and I just looked at him like, ‘I don’t get what’s so funny.’ Like, ‘I’m telling you my grandma passed, and you are laughing about it.’”²⁸¹

Others expressed situations where Marines used humor to condone or excuse bad behavior. When discussing incidents of racist and sexist comments, Marines talked about how people excuse that behavior with “Oh well, I’m just joking. This is how we joke all the time.”²⁸² A staff sergeant described an incident when she was working on the gate as a lance corporal and a sergeant on duty told her to get in the car because the platoon sergeant needed to see her. The sergeant drove her to a “dark, deserted, wooded area in [*two words removed due to potential risk to participant*]” and said,

“Hey, I want a blowjob.” ... I kinda just looked at him and just got out of the car and started to walk away ... and he drove up next to me, and he was like, “I’m just fucking with you, dude. Like, it’s not a big deal.” ... What am I supposed, what do you do as a lance corporal? I’m 20 years old. This is my first time in the Marine Corps, like, I’m new at this. You’re the only leadership I’ve ever known, and this is what happens. I was not assertive when I first joined the Marine Corps. I was not aggressive. ... I’ve always been a friendly person, I’ve always been outgoing. But little experiences like that throughout my career. Now, I’m just a fireball of fire.”²⁸³

Marines discussed the inappropriate and disrespectful humor they witnessed, some directed at them, some at others, and some in response to training. One 2nd lieutenant described the joking that her peers directed at her.

My male friends would joke ... with me that I’m a female. I’m Asian. I’m diverse. I can do whatever I want in the Marine Corps just because I am a minority within there. They’re like, “they need minorities to be in these billets and to be visible.” So they’re like, “You

²⁷⁹ This section only discusses those examples that are framed as a joke or with humor. There are many other instances of inappropriate or disrespectful comments that the Marines describe that do not involve words that would indicate some kind of humor. This section is limited in scope with regard to such comments in the data.

²⁸⁰ Participant #309, Corporal, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 14 September 2017.

²⁸¹ Participant #611, Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 13 September 2017.

²⁸² Participant #327, Staff Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Butler, 19 October 2017.

²⁸³ Participant #216, Staff Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 13 September 2017.

are set.” Like, “You can do whatever you want.” ... It pisses me off ‘cause it's not my merit and what I'm competent of, it's my race and ‘cause I'm a female.²⁸⁴

A 1st sergeant described the jokes she received when she was a drill instructor. “Of course, there would always be jokes about women or sending guys to the Fourth Battalion, and ... I took it personal because what's wrong with us? What's wrong with Fourth Battalion? We could probably eat up some of your drill instructors ...”²⁸⁵ A sergeant discussed the dark humor in his criminal investigation office and how it affected him personally as well as how he learned to use lighter humor as a deterrent tactic.

We deal with sexual assaults and rape victims and everything else in our job. And to deal with it, a lot of people like to make jokes about it because that's just kind of how they process things, and I understand that. But having been a former rape victim, it always kind of just irks me the wrong way. [*laughs*] So like one of them will be sitting at the desk and be looking through the crime scene photos and stuff like, “Oh, well, you see? She was wearing pink underwear. Of course, she was asking for it.” Like he meant it as a joke, of course, but it's still just grinds my gears, but being someone who is new to the MOS, I wasn't in a position where I could say, “Hey, look, staff sergeant, that's fucked up [*laughs*].” ... And honestly I would join them because if I didn't just join in on the joking, then I think I probably would have broken down and just hit somebody or something. It just pisses me off. So if I can think of the joke first and say something like, “Oh, that's what she said or your mom,” [*laughs*] so something stupid like that, then I can usually drive the conversation away from them saying something really fucked up.²⁸⁶

As examples of disrespectful or inappropriate responses to training, one Marine recounted,

I remember our transgender class. Our OIC, he took it seriously, and he was professional about it, but as soon as we get dismissed, the rest - like I work in a majority NCO section now and everybody was like, “Oh, I identify as a hot dog this week. Ha ha ha.” And ... they are joking about it.²⁸⁷

Another Marine described his experience in the transgender class.

The brief that we had was in a classroom, and I was very glad that our platoon sergeant answered questions professionally and went through the brief and said what he needed to say. But the whole platoon was tongue-in-cheek, just did not at all want to hear what was being said. They did not at all want to sympathize or empathize. They were making crude comments like, “oh, if I go on a MEU and I identify as a woman, can I stay in the female barracks or something like that?” Just very crass comments, ... and then when they asked tongue-in-cheek questions, the platoon sergeant said, “I literally have to tell you all the answers. So if you want to be belligerent, I will give you your answer, and we'll waste time here. But if you don't have questions, like legitimately, then we can move on.”²⁸⁸

Another Marine recounted her experience in a class.

We recently had a speaker in our curriculum. And it was very disappointing for me to watch my peers in front of me, laughing at her as she was speaking. I actually saw future

²⁸⁴ Participant #271, 2nd Lieutenant, Interview, MCB Camp Butler, 19 October 2017.

²⁸⁵ Participant #306, 1st Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 13 September 2017.

²⁸⁶ Participant #308, Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 14 September 2017.

²⁸⁷ Participant #040, Corporal, Focus Group, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

²⁸⁸ Participant #021, Private First Class, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 22 August 2017.

commanders sitting in front of me laughing and making snide jokes, and I think to myself, “wow – you in the next couple of years are going to be leading.”²⁸⁹

The Role of the Leader

How humor displays in the work place is varied and largely determined by the tone set by the leadership.²⁹⁰ Several Marines, when discussing humor, mentioned that this is a professional environment and recognized the need to act differently because of that. “There are even things that maybe I would laugh at if I were in a small group of friends. But this isn't a small group of friends. This is the workplace.”²⁹¹ According to some of the Marines to whom we spoke, leaders have a responsibility to set the tone in the work space and establish the boundaries for humor and appropriate behavior. For example, one captain explained,

I think as leaders, if we condone [inappropriate humor] on the front side, then it's just a slippery slope. It just really is. And ... then that creates a hostile work environment. Whereas if you set the tone early and you say, “Hey, we are going to be 100% professionals. That's it. No ifs, ands, or buts about it.”, I think ... a lot more people feel more comfortable operating in that environment because they know what the boundaries are and they know that in the workplace, it will just not be tolerated.²⁹²

A master sergeant paralleled that on the enlisted side as well, stating especially ... if you're a senior staff NCO or a staff NCO ... and NCOs' grooming themselves to be staff NCOs, they have to know what professionalism is, okay? What things should be discussed, what things should not be discussed, what's appropriate for a joke and what's inappropriate and being cognizant of your environment.²⁹³

Marines offered several examples of Marine leaders doing just this. As an example, the captain mentioned above had just come from a very hostile environment and arrived in a new unit whose leader had established very strict parameters on humor. She remarked on how such action by a leader impacted her sense of cohesion within the unit.

When I transitioned over to the logistic side of the house, it was just, “Nope. There is absolutely no room for it. No off colored jokes, no sexist remarks. Like it's just not going to fly. Don't say it. Don't say it when I'm not in the room, and do not say it when I am in the room.” I actually had ... more camaraderie and people who were closer in that environment than I did in the environment where people would take jabs at each other if you will ... that were quote unquote good natured.²⁹⁴

Unfortunately, many times this seems to not be happening, or worse, leaders appear complicit in the behavior. Marines provided many examples. The following three accounts touch on three different identity factors – ethnicity, transgender, female – to provide a range of experiences. There are many factors at play in each story, too many to unpack in this report. In these and the

²⁸⁹ Participant #201, Major, Focus Group, MCB Quantico, 6 September 2017.

²⁹⁰ For more on this, see William B. Vogler, “Humor and Work: Toward a more contextual understanding of humor in workplace.” Dissertation, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, December 2011.

²⁹¹ Participant #326, 1st Lieutenant, Interview, MCB Camp Butler, 19 October 2017.

²⁹² Participant #235, Captain, Interview, MCAS Yuma, 26 September 2017.

²⁹³ Participant #044, Master Sergeant, Focus Group, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

²⁹⁴ Participant #235, Captain, Interview, MCAS Yuma, 26 September 2017.

other stories presented, the stories stand unanalyzed and are presented to give the reader a glimpse into how the Marines are describing their experiences. In future reports, the researchers plan to delve more into the myriad social processes at play.

One corporal addressed leadership complicity in inappropriate humor involving racism.

[T]he first time I experienced like any sort of racism was when I was in the Marine Corps. ... I know we have all those classes and courses and stuff to kind of encourage each other, like, "Hey, we're all Marines. We're all brothers and sisters," but even at higher levels like it still comes down. Like they'll joke about it, and there's only so much you can do 'cause you don't want to be like the hammer - or the nail that's sticking out. ... I can remember one officer who made a remark, made me feel kind of uncomfortable 'cause he cracked a joke, but the week before we had the whole ... discrimination brief, the EO²⁹⁵ brief, EO training and stuff, and I know everyone in the command goes to that 'cause it's a requirement, or a first sergeant will make a remark and then everyone in the room will start laughing and stuff, and I feel like it's just too casual about it²⁹⁶

A staff sergeant offered an example where she confronted officers at the rifle range when she overheard them making transgender jokes.

I think that it gets more amped up when you do have those group of Marines just sitting there talking and not really knowing their surroundings, and they're kinda amping each other up, and they're trying to out-joke the jokester. ... I saw it just recently when I was at the range. There was a group of grunt units there, and when the transgender ban came down and they were just making just completely inappropriate remarks, loudly. And then finally I'm walking by, I'm like, "are you guys really gonna do this right now?" Like, "are we just gonna - we're gonna do that? We're gonna go there?" Like, "that's what you think respecting people is about?" Whether you agree with it or not, to make those who do feel uncomfortable is not really appropriate. You would be amazed that it wasn't lance corporals. This wasn't those PFCs. This was a second lieutenant and a sergeant. ... but to see that it was a second lieutenant, I was, like, "you know what? ... like sir, really?"²⁹⁷

Another staff sergeant described an incident targeting her sex where one of the unit's PFCs had gotten drunk and began repeatedly hitting on her despite her vehement rebukes and in front of the company's leadership who did nothing to help. "His squad leader was there, his platoon sergeant was there, our first sergeant of the company was there, and the captain of the company. They were all there." She explained how the next morning she went to report this incident of harassment and found that the now sober leadership thought the entire incident was a joke.

When I was explaining to them the situation that happened and why I was really not okay with it, they were laughing about it. At first it was like a joke. They were like, "That's so funny. ... Good for him, having the fortitude to be trying to hit on you." ... Like they were praising it. ... Like, "You think it's funny that this little PFC is so cool that he drank enough beers that he thought it was okay to hit on me?" And I get it. That's funny. You hit on me; it's not gonna happen. But how many times do I have to tell you 'no' before it's no longer ... funny anymore? I'm screaming at this kid, like "get the fuck away from me!" And from

²⁹⁵ Equal opportunity.

²⁹⁶ Participant #052, Corporal, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

²⁹⁷ Participant #043, Staff Sergeant, Focus Group, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

a captain to a first sergeant to a staff sergeant to a sergeant and a corporal who are all in his chain in command, none of you guys say something to stand up for me? Were you really that oblivious or did it just not ... affect you?²⁹⁸

Marines discussed how such behavior not only isolates targeted individuals but also teaches junior Marines that this type of behavior is acceptable. One 1st lieutenant explained, “If I am making chauvinistic comments or jokes, then my Marines are going to say it's okay to do it because my officer is doing it.”²⁹⁹ A colonel noted, “If you snicker along with a joke like that, then that just breeds that.”³⁰⁰ One major talked about confronting fellow aviators for making inappropriate jokes. “And I'm like ‘the crew chiefs can hear you saying that. You're setting a terrible example for the junior Marines,’ and I was just so angry.”³⁰¹ A captain explained the reaction his officer in charge gave him when he tried to stop what he felt was inappropriate joking.

I heard ... Marine[s] joking back and forth with each other about butt sex. I'm like, “Are you freaking kidding me?” And I looked at this Marine, and I was like - and I got chewed out for it later by my OIC - I was like, “Man, you're lucky you're not my Marine 'cause I guarantee you that kinda language and stuff would reflect in your fit rep and who you are as a Marine.” I got chewed out for that, for saying, ... threatening his fit rep because of the way he's talking. “That's how Marines talk. You just need to get used to it.”³⁰²

Another captain explained her actions upon hearing inappropriate comments coming from her commanding officer's open office.

There's humor, but then there's downright inappropriateness. So any kind of slurs, any racial ethnic slurs ... Things like that are not appropriate. ... I've heard conversation in my CO's office. Not here but prior units, and it got to the point where I was listening to the point of like, “Okay, we're not having this.” I went over there, and I shut the door. And then ... Yeah like, “Hey, how about the juniors Marines shouldn't be hearing the CO, XO's³⁰³, and sergeant major talking like that. So I'm just going to close this hatch.” And then, afterwards like, “Hey, sorry about that.” I'm like, “Sir, you just got to be careful. Be mindful of who's in the hallway.” But I don't want to be part of that. I mean there's joking around, but it's like different types of people in the Marine Corps joke around in different ways, you know?³⁰⁴

As Marines learn how to lead from those above them, senior leadership may want to consider the implications of such actions from their senior Marines. As a 1st lieutenant stated, “culture very much is a trickle-down thing.”³⁰⁵

²⁹⁸ Participant #216, Staff Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 13 September 2017.

²⁹⁹ Participant #507, 1st Lieutenant, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 13 September 2017.

³⁰⁰ Participant #617, Colonel, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 18 September 2017.

³⁰¹ Participant #206, Major, Focus Group, MCB Quantico, 6 September 2017.

³⁰² Participant #523, Captain, Interview, MCAS Yuma, 27 September 2017.

³⁰³ Executive officer.

³⁰⁴ Participant #230, Captain, Interview, MCAS Yuma, 25 September 2017.

³⁰⁵ Participant #326, 1st Lieutenant, Interview, MCB Camp Butler, 19 October 2017.

How People Respond to Such Incidents

When talking about such incidents, the Marines with whom we spoke provided insights into how they or others responded and how the incidents impacted them or the targets of them. As noted above, some fight back, some get angry, some become complicit to fit in, some reach out to the offender and talk, most develop a thick skin, and some become so tired they intend to separate. One male latino corporal talked about how he sometimes speaks up but noted there can be backlash.

I'm not just gonna to stay quiet the entire time. I'll tell someone, "Hey, you know, that's not cool." Like stuff like that or I'll talk to someone one on one, but it's like it's engrained, so you can't really – "you're being too sensitive" or they start throwing around like, "Hey, you're a liberal," or stuff like that.³⁰⁶

The female Asian Marine from above discussed how she most of the time has "unfortunately taken the route of just sit there and be quiet and just kind of like listen to it. ... Because they are my good friends"³⁰⁷ despite the fact it makes her uncomfortable. Another Marine also mentioned staying silent, explaining "when I was a young Marine, I just kind of giggled and went with it and just didn't say anything."³⁰⁸ She expressed guilt for having stayed quiet and not pushing back. Now as she nears retirement, she said,

Now, unfortunately, it's late in the game. I'm to the point where, and maybe ... because I'm so close to retirement that I don't really care too much about the ramifications, ... what's going to happen? I definitely have the strength to tell anybody "Hey, that's really messed up. Don't say crap like that."³⁰⁹

Another Marine described her range of emotions and responses over time.

So a lot of people think that I'm Muslim, and they think I'm from Pakistan or the Middle [East], and they'll make comments on that. Even my husband jokes about it, but he'll call me "allah 'akbar" and stuff like that ... but I feel like the Marine Corps kind of makes you ... numb to those things after a certain point because ... you get so used to it. You just like, "OK." You just laugh it off. ... Like with my husband after one point, it got really annoying. So I'm like, "okay." Like, "I'm a Sikh. I'm not a Muslim. Stop calling me that." Like I'm offended now 'cause obviously Sikhs and Muslims have their differences. But I've pushed past all that. And when I can, I educate people on it. I'm like "hey, there's a difference between Sikhs and Muslims or this and that." I know most of the time the Marines mean it in a good manner. They're just joking around.³¹⁰

A staff sergeant provided the various steps she goes through when confronting such a situation.

That's where the fine-tuning of your personality comes into play. The moment I start feeling uncomfortable, ... I'll just try to avoid the situation. Like, change the conversation, start talking about something else. And if that doesn't work, then I'm confident enough that I can be direct. Like, "okay, that's ... we're done talking about that now. If you

³⁰⁶ Participant #052, Corporal, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

³⁰⁷ Participant #271, 2nd Lieutenant, Interview, MCB Camp Butler, 19 October 2017.

³⁰⁸ Participant #325, Captain, Interview, MCB Camp Butler, 19 October 2017.

³⁰⁹ Ibid.

³¹⁰ Participant #611, Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 13 September 2017.

continue talking about it, I'm just gonna leave 'cause you're being an idiot." And then that usually people will be like, "okay, alright, too far, too far."³¹¹

One sergeant discussed what he thought the impact such joking and behavior would have on the intended target.

You can tell it definitely has an effect on the Marine that it's directed to, and maybe they don't realize that. And maybe it's such a common thing that people feel like they're free to joke about it. Like, it's a common stereotype so we're all going to joke about it and make light of it, but I don't think it's necessarily a situation to make light of, especially if it's directed at a single person. A shop full of Marines, there's one female Marine and the rest of the Marines in the shop feel like they're open to kinda make jokes about it. I mean she's gonna feel pretty singled out and you could probably see how that have a great negative effect on her so.³¹²

Several Marines discussed participating in the action to fit in or belong and just getting used it over time. Like the Sikh Marine above, a lance corporal explained that the homosexual Marines she knows are okay with gay jokes "because there's a certain level you've got to get used to because you're in the Marine Corps."³¹³ A Marine described how a female Marine, trying to fit in, started her briefing with a sexist joke, as was standard practice.

Getting to that culture thing, new squadron shows up to RIP³¹⁴ with us, they have female pilots. Our XO is like, "guys, I don't want to hear a single one of these jokes. If you stand up, they better be clean." Well, the first brief we do together, our guy stands up, gives his clean joke. And then their boot stands up, who's a female, and tells the dirtiest, sexist joke I've ever heard. She's doing it to fit in. That's the reality, you know. Like she knows how to get by in that community because the, we don't have a lot of female HMLA pilots. We just don't. And so they adapt.³¹⁵

The male African American sergeant from earlier noted when discussing female Marines, They can take a joke. If not, they definitely do dish it. They do dish it out. ... Now before probably a couple of years back they were probably kind of sensitive to certain things that male Marines would say, but it's like now that they've gotten used to how the Marine Corps and the male population in the Marine Corps, how we speak to everyone basically, they want to be a part. They don't want to be separate.³¹⁶

He also noted how he has gotten used to the continued African American-related jokes and comments he hears and receives. "A day would not pass if a Marine does not say anything African American-related. But me as a person, it's like I'm used to it."³¹⁷ The sergeant criminal investigator noted above used humor to diffuse the situation and prevent it from going even farther into uncomfortable territory.

³¹¹ Participant #216, Staff Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 13 September 2017.

³¹² Participant #106, Sergeant, Interview, Pentagon, 7 September 2017.

³¹³ Participant #224, Lance Corporal, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 20 September 2017.

³¹⁴ Relief in place.

³¹⁵ Participant #105, Captain, Focus Group, MCB Quantico, 6 September 2017.

³¹⁶ Participant #042, Sergeant, Interview, MCB Camp Lejeune, 23 August 2017.

³¹⁷ Ibid.

Such responses can lead people to assume that everything is okay and that people are not bothered; however, they also can represent the normalizing of a hostile environment and people's need to adapt to survive. At some point, these individuals may hit their breaking point like the Afghan heritage Marine who is choosing to separate despite being offered a sizable reenlistment bonus, as is her husband, because she is tired of this and for other reasons that have to do with Marine Corps culture. "I'm tired of being called a dirty fucking Muslim or a sand nigger or a towelhead or a raghead or I shot your uncle in Afghanistan or what's that darko-darko language that you guys speak over there. I'm fucking tired of it."³¹⁸ Senior leadership may want consider the possible impact these types of comments have on the retention of quality Marines.

So is that supposed to be funny?

As the Marines above discussed, the answer to that question is not simple and is dependent on myriad factors. What someone is trying to convey through humor significantly impacts cohesion, oftentimes, positively, and yes, negatively as well. How humor is allowed to display within units is largely up to the leaders and the example and tone they set. Humor and the way it affects the environment and Marines' sense of professionalism provide another example of an issue linked to the need to ensure leaders have those hard-to-measure leadership skills and characteristics.

³¹⁸ Participant #309, Corporal, Interview, MCB Camp Pendleton, 14 September 2017.

Conclusion

While the discussions that led to this research were spurred by the Marine Corps' response to the Marines United misconduct, its design was guided by longer-term conversations with Marine leaders about Marine Corps culture. As expected, Marines spoke to a very wide range of issues, many but not all of which contribute to the type of behavior seen on Marines United. A semi-structured, in-depth questioning style allowed participating Marines to take the interviews and focus groups where they needed them to go to discuss their perceptions of and experiences with Marine Corps culture. Throughout 150 interviews and 32 focus groups with 267 unique participants at locations in the United States and Japan, participants talked about innumerable and complex topics, from which certain themes emerged. We selected the most salient themes to provide senior leaders a deeper understanding of what is occurring in the Marine Corps and the associated impacts on the organization and the individuals within.

In summary, this report addressed the following themes in the preceding sections:

- 1) The unsurprised reactions to online misconduct (some of which was experienced personally by participants), which lend credibility to the notion that Marines United is a symptom of a much larger problem(s).
- 2) The common perception that Marines are rising through the ranks to become leaders without meeting the leadership standards Marines expect and the idea that less tangible leadership skills, such as empathy, are undervalued yet crucial elements to good leadership.
- 3) Marines' sense that PFT/CFT scores, commonly used to rank Marines professionally and socially, are becoming entangled with negative perceptions of female Marines.
- 4) The perception from both male and female Marines that female Marines face challenges on a daily basis that their brothers in the Corps do not have to face; conversely, a pervasive sense that the way Marine performance is assessed and how promotions are decided gives female Marines unfair advantages.
- 5) The potential for Marines to experience hostility in certain environments, including the aviation community, the barracks, and the workplace for pregnant and breastfeeding Marines.
- 6) The complex deliberations surrounding Marines' decisions to stay in the Corps or to leave and what these deliberations potentially reveal about Marines' expectations and realities.
- 7) The lessons that humor can teach us about cohesion, leadership, and difference in the Marine Corps.

Additionally, the report provided several over-arching takeaways that are included in the introductory section. The themes presented are diverse and interconnected. Recognizing this complexity can help the Marine Corps frame problems more accurately and comprehensively, leading to more effective solutions.

This report represents the conclusion of the first phase of the Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research project. The research team is currently working with the data set to clean and organize it for more structured analysis. The specific topics for structured analysis and the types and timelines for future reports will be established over the coming months through discussions with CAOCL's leadership and other Marine Corps organizations.

Appendix A: Participant Demographics



Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research: Participant Characteristics

Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning

Marine Corps University

30 March 2018

This project is being conducted under Marine Corps Human Subjects Protocol #USMC.2017.0005 and under the provisions of academic freedom in Marine Corps University's *Academic Regulations* (2016).

DISTRIBUTION: UNLIMITED



Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research Overview

- IRB Protocol: #USMC.2017.0005, approved July 2017
- Data Collection: August – October 2017
- Sites: MCB Camp Lejeune, MCAS Cherry Point, MCB Quantico, Pentagon, MCB Camp Pendleton, MCAGCC 29 Palms, MCAS Yuma, and MCB Camp Butler

YOUR VOICE IS VITAL
GIVE US AN HONEST VIEW OF YOUR

MARINE CORPS

MARINE CORPS CULTURE STUDY*
MARINE CORPS SENIOR LEADERS WANT TO LEARN MORE ABOUT MARINES' PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES RELATED TO SOCIAL COHESION, GENDER BIAS, AND LEADERSHIP WITHIN OUR RANKS. ACTIVE DUTY MARINES CAN CONTRIBUTE TO THIS STUDY BY PARTICIPATING IN EITHER A FOCUS GROUP OR A ONE-ON-ONE INTERVIEW.
TO REGISTER FOR ONE OF THE UPCOMING SESSIONS, PLEASE VISIT [HTTPS://SURVEY.MAX.GOV/389172](https://survey.max.gov/389172) OR EMAIL MCU_CULTURESTUDY@USMCU.EDU

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OKINAWA, JAPAN

*THIS RESEARCH PROJECT IS CONDUCTED UNDER HUMAN SUBJECTS RESEARCH PROTOCOL # USMC.2017.0005



Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research

Understanding the Project

Research purpose

- Small, exploratory research project to gather Marine perspectives and experiences of Marine Corps organizational culture with a focus on social cohesion, gender, and leadership.
- Project's intent is to yield insights that can be used to shape problem definitions and refine future targeted research and analysis efforts.
- Project is **not** designed or resourced to yield causes, correlations, or representative data that can be quantified for statistical analysis.

Participant demographics

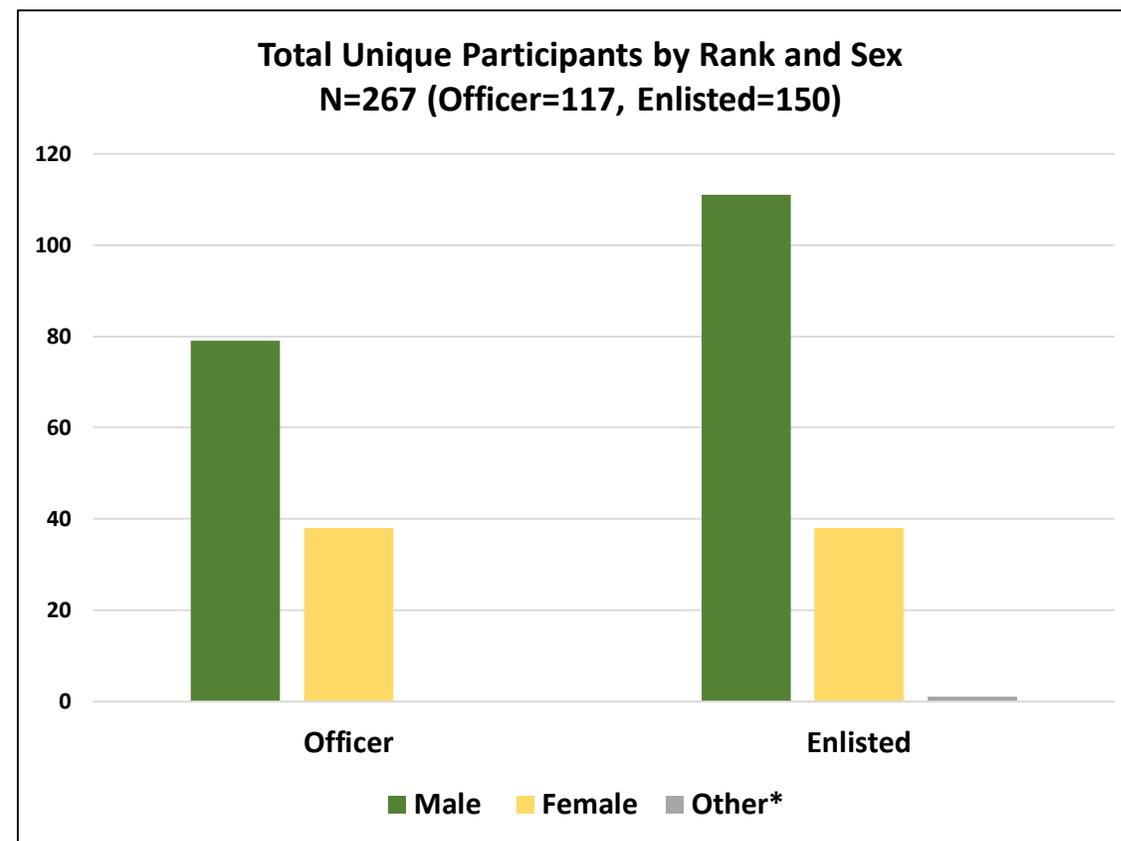
- Research is exploratory and sample is **not intended to be representative of the Marine Corps**.
- Participants were volunteers who were available at specific sites during a constrained time window.
- Reservists were not included due to a limitation imposed by Marine Corps policy.
- Demographic data presented here are intended to describe the pool of volunteer participants. Slides highlighting similarities and differences to the broader population of Marines are provided for informational purposes only.

The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the United States Marine Corps, Davis Defense Group, or Corps Solutions. This project is being conducted under Marine Corps Human Subjects Protocol #USMC.2017.0005.



Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research Overview

- Methods (all semi-structured): focus groups and interviews
- Total Unique Participants: 267
 - Three rank groupings: Officers, SNCO (E6-E9), Sgts and Below (E1-E5)
 - Note: 9 individuals participated in both an interview and a focus group
- Total participants in focus groups: 124
 - Number of focus groups conducted: 32
- Total participants in interviews: 151
 - Number of interviews conducted: 150
 - One interview included 2 participants



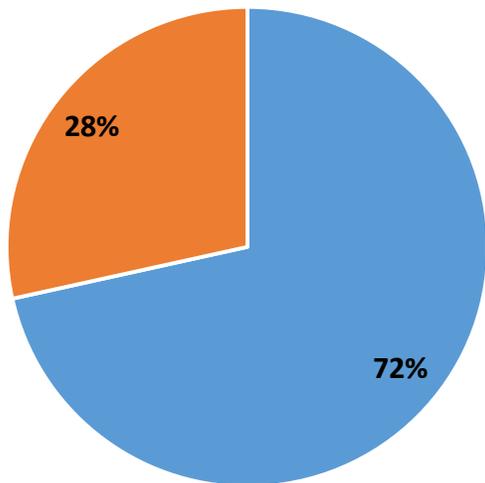
* One individual identified as transgender. Subsequently, due to potential risk of participant identification, this category is being included in the male category.



Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research: USMC Demographics

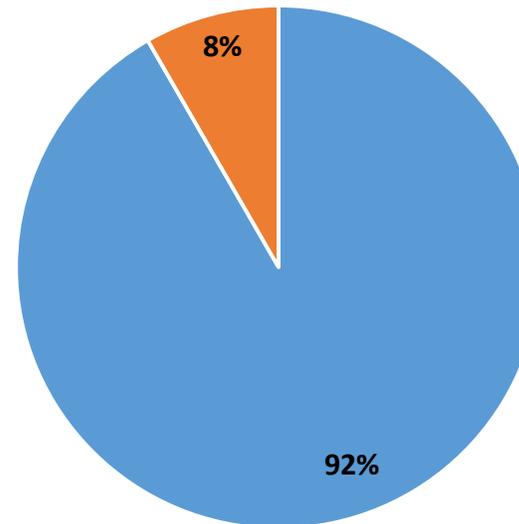
Sex Category Self Identification Sample vs. Population

**Participants in MCOCR Sample
N = 267**



■ Male ■ Female

**USMC Total Population (DMDC, 6/17)
N = 184,642**

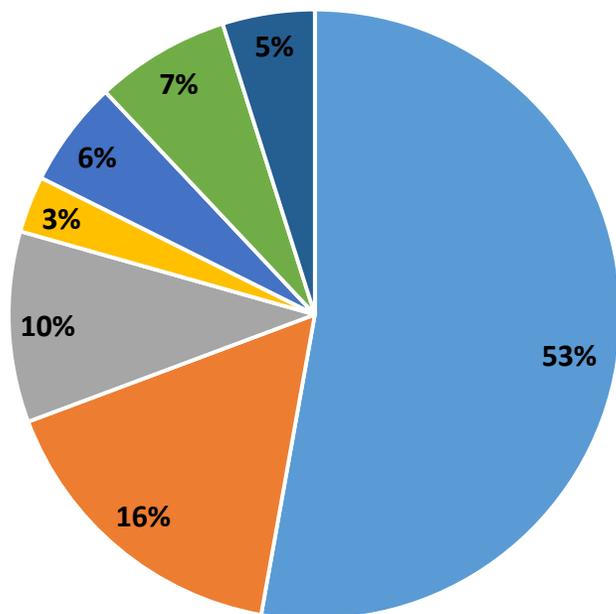


■ Male ■ Female



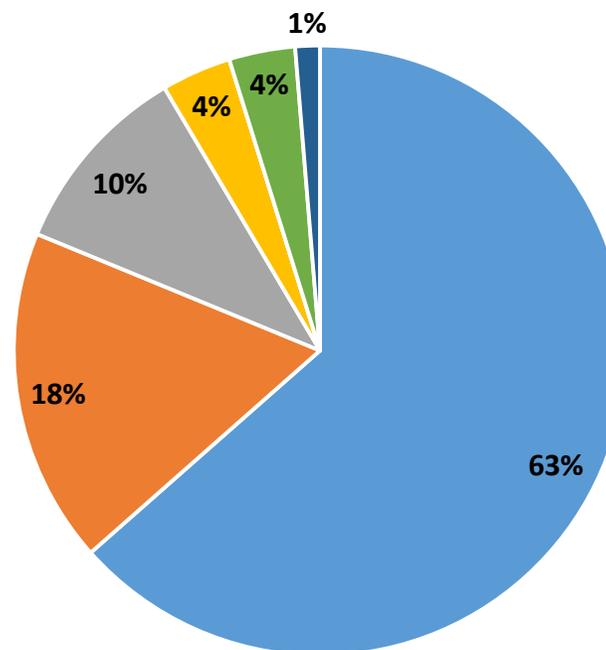
Ethnic Category Self Identification Sample vs. Population

Participants in MCOCR Sample*
N = 267



Total USMC Population (Source: TFDW, 6/17)
N = 185,010

- White
- Hispanic
- Black
- Asian
- Sample White with Other**
- All Others***
- Info Not Avail



* Participants were asked to write in their ethnicity.

** This category is unique to the MCOCR Sample. The USMC total population did not report this category.

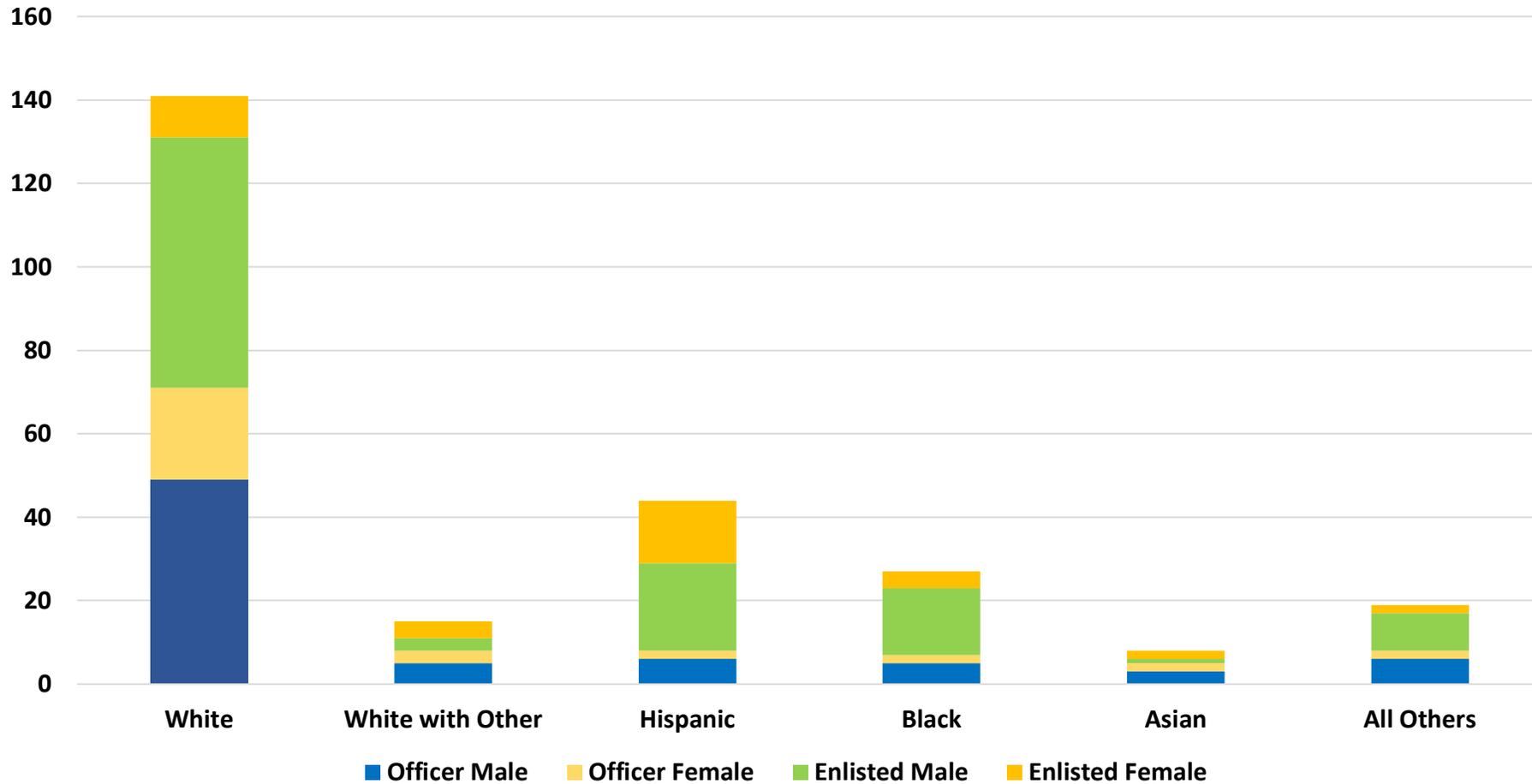
*** MCOCR Sample: Responded with any other ethnicity (ies), **not including** White/Caucasian, White+Other, Black/African American, Asian ; answers included "human", "?", "American"
USMC Population: Includes categories of: Native Hawaiian and other Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaskan Native, and Other



Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research: Ethnic Categorization

Participant Ethnic Category Self Identification

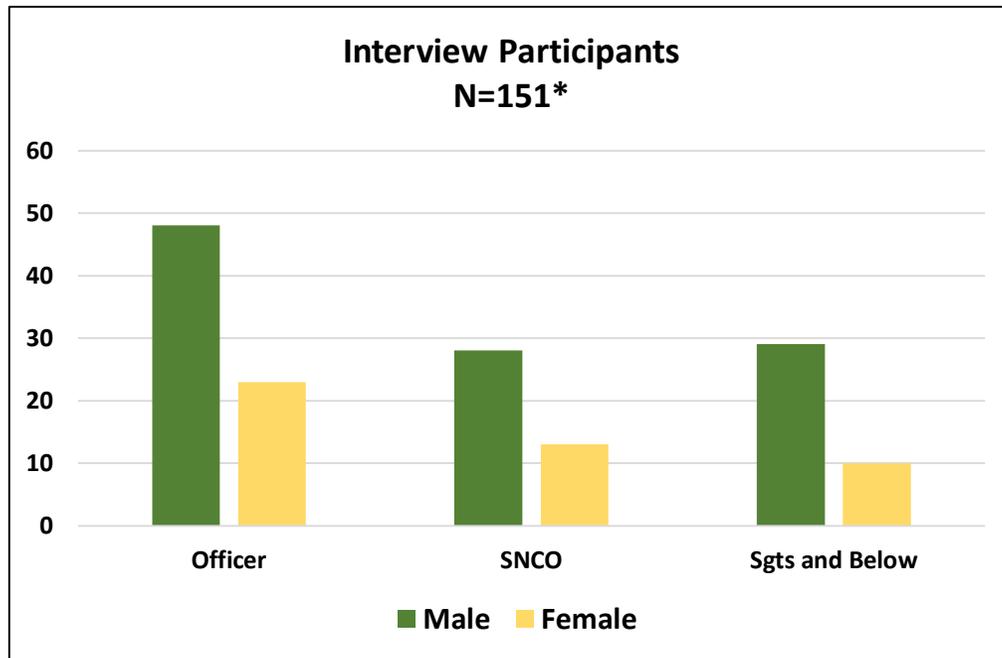
Ethnic Self-Report Categorization by Rank and Sex
N=254





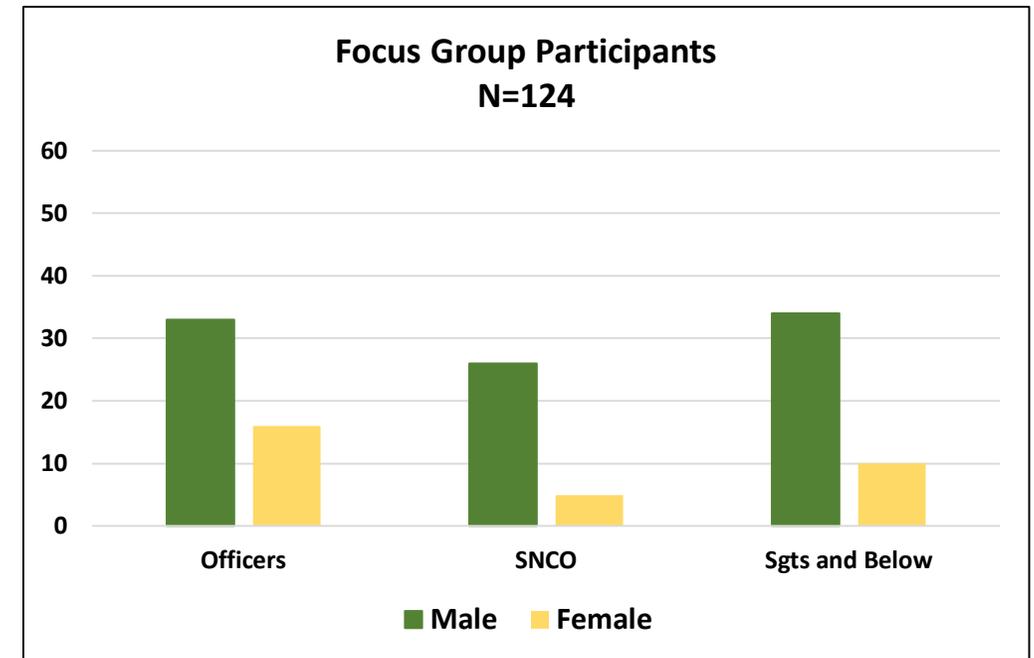
Data Collection Methods

Individual Interview Participants Arranged by Rank and Sex Groupings



*One interview was conducted as a group with 2 participants. 150 total interviews.

Focus Group Participants Arranged by Rank and Sex Groupings





Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research: Participant Characteristics

Data Collection Methods

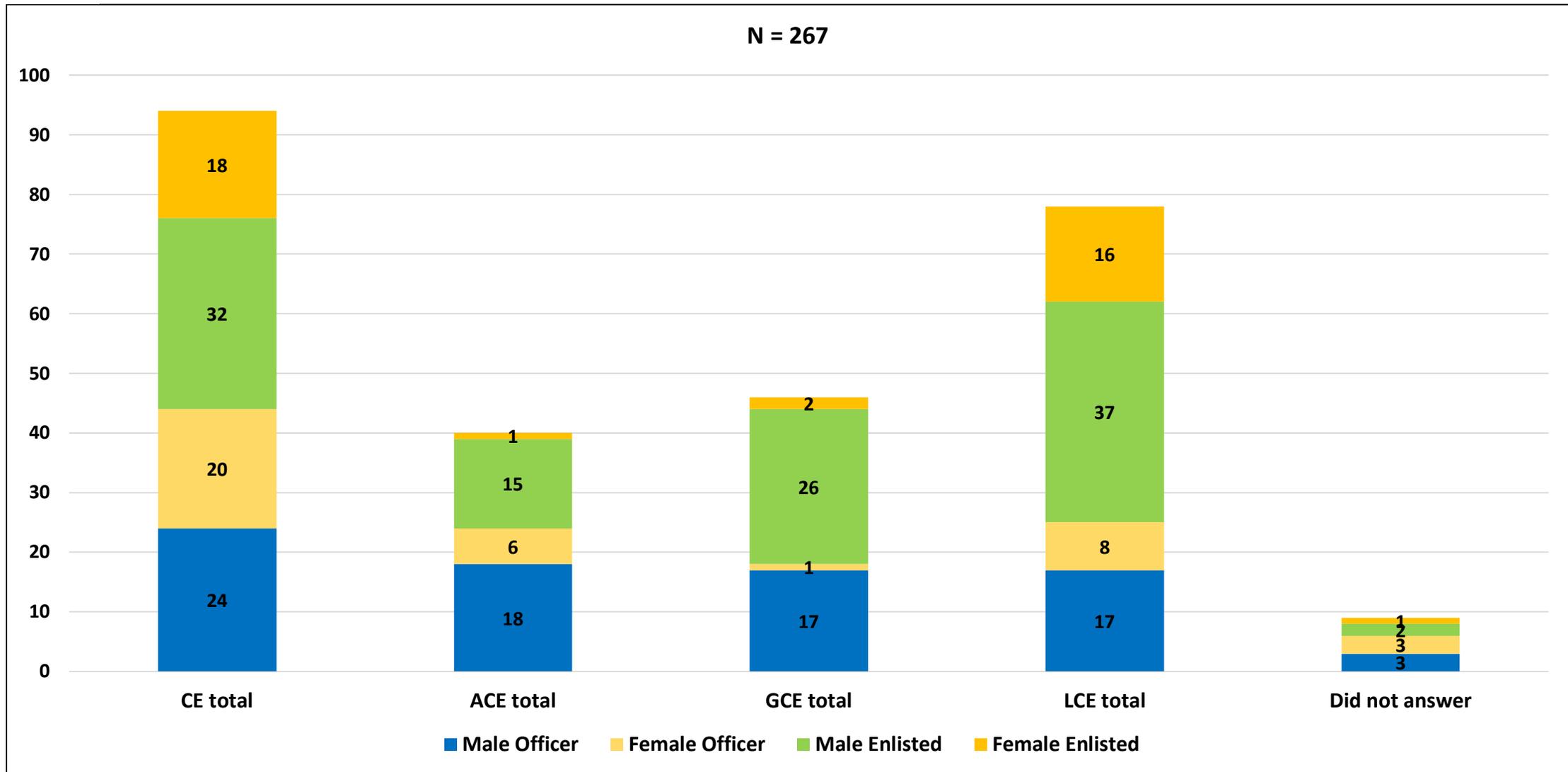
Number of Focus Groups Arranged by Rank and Sex Groupings*

| Numbers of FGs conducted by type | Male | Female | Mixed Sex* |
|----------------------------------|------|--------|------------|
| Officers | 7 | 2 | 4 |
| SNCO | 6 | 1 | 1 |
| Sergeants and Below | 6 | 3 | 1 |
| All enlisted ranks | 0 | 1 | 0 |

*Our ability to conduct mixed sex focus groups was limited based upon participant choice and availability.



Participants by occupational field Grouped by MAGTF Element, Rank, & Sex

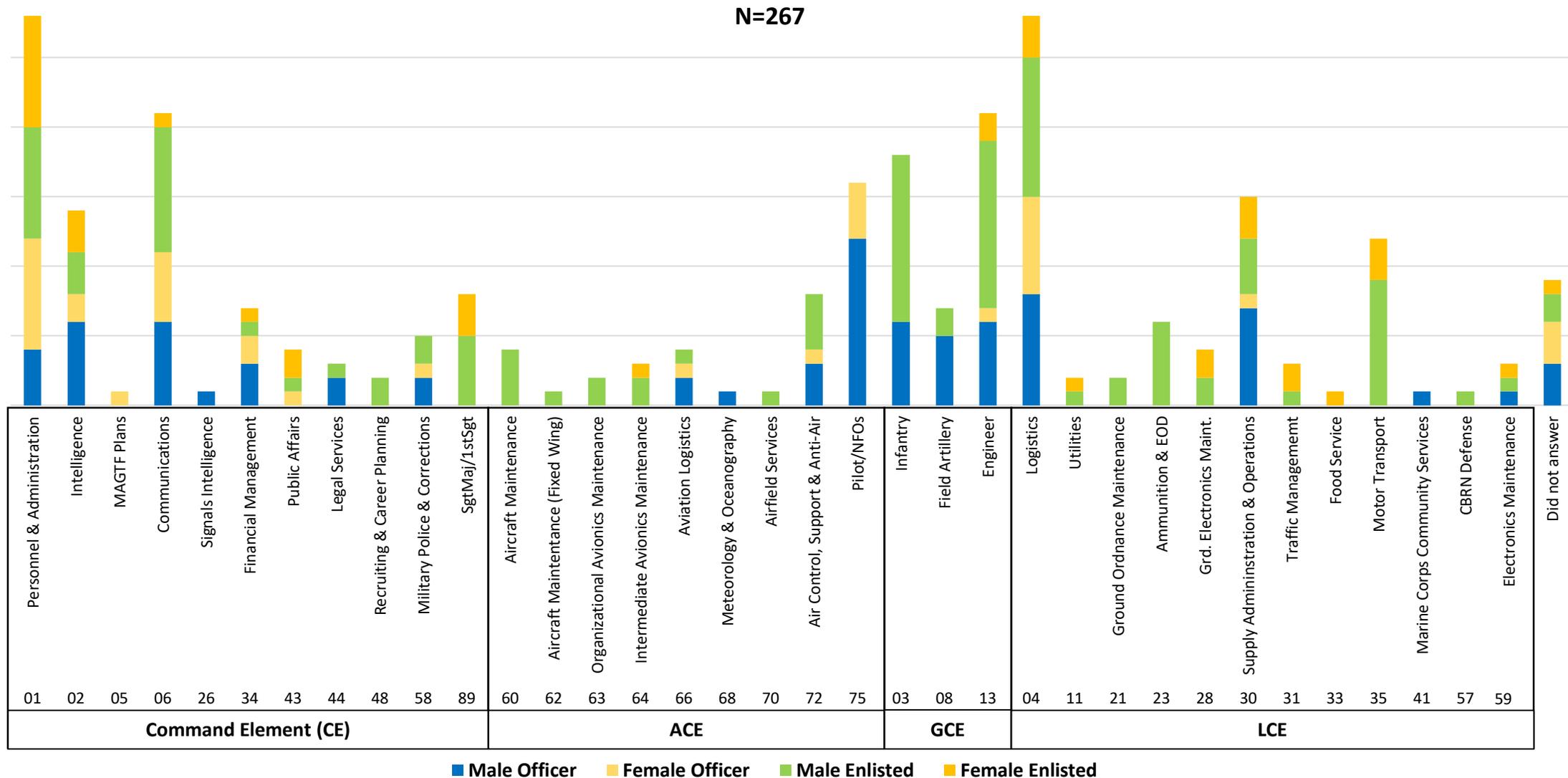




Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research: Participant Characteristics

Participants by Occupation Field, Rank, & Sex

N=267





Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research: Participant Characteristics

Participants by Location, Rank, & Sex

