

Quick-Look Report: USMC.2017.0005

**Insights from the Marine Corps Organizational Culture
Research Project: Empathy in Leadership**

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Marine Corps Organizational Culture (MCOCR) Project Report Front Matter

The following seven pages of front matter provide background relevant to the report that may be of interest to some readers. This material accompanies all reports from the MCOCR Project posted in the Open Anthropology Research Repository. MCOCR reports were designed for an applied audience of military and civilian officials of the U.S. Marine Corps rather than a scholarly audience. Therefore some background information, such as research team composition and the incidents of social media harassment that led to the project, is assumed rather than explicit. Included in the front matter are:

Pages	Information
1-2	Project Overview
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4	Background on the “Marines United” Scandal
5-7	Background on the Translational Research Group

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Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research Project Overview

June 2020 (updated Sep 2022)

Project Overview

The Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research (MCOCR) Project was an exploratory research effort requested by the U.S. Marine Corps, Manpower and Reserve Affairs (M&RA), in July 2017 to gather information on Marine Corps culture. The project arose in part from concerns related to the Marines United social media misconduct (see page 4 of this document for more information) and also from longer-term leadership questions regarding shifts in Marine Corps culture. The research was conducted by the Translational Research Group (TRG) at Marine Corps University (MCU). [See pages 5-7 for more information on TRG.] The project was governed by Marine Corps Human Subjects Protection Protocol #USMC.2017.0005 and the provisions of academic freedom in MCU's *Academic Regulations*. The Principal Investigator for the project was Dr. Kerry Foshier.

The intent of the project was to develop a broad, robust base of data and analyses related to Marine Corps culture that could be mined over the years to provide context and insights that could be used to inform problem-framing and decision-making on a range of issues and to complement/enhance other research methods, such as surveys.

Additionally, the project was intended to support scholarly analysis and publication. The project was not intended to be representative of the entire Marine Corps or to support statistical analyses. As with most exploratory research, results were intended to inform discussion rather than make claims or advance particular positions regarding any Marine Corps program or policy. For additional information see the Frequently Asked Questions on page 3.

The **first phase** of MCOCR involved research design, data gathering, initial analysis, and production of two expedited reports. The research team collected data from Aug-Oct 2017 at installations in the United States and Japan, conducting 182 interviews and focus groups that were recorded and transcribed for analysis. Initial analysis focused on issues related to leadership, cohesion, and gender bias, captured in reports to the Marine Corps' Personnel Studies and Oversight (PSO) Office, later renamed the Talent Management Oversight Directorate (TMOD).

A *Quick Look Report* on issues specifically related to the Marines United misconduct was delivered to PSO in February 2018. A broader initial *Report to PSO* was expedited and delivered on 30 March 2018. This report organized preliminary analysis into the following themes:

1. Marines United and the Prevalence of Online Misconduct
2. Challenges with and for Leadership
3. The Procedural and Social Uses of PFT/CFT Scores
4. Experiences of Female Marines
5. Hostile Environments
6. Remaining a Marine: How Enlisted and Officers Deliberate and Decide
7. Cohesion, Leadership, and Difference through the Lens of Humor

With the delivery of the initial report and associated materials to PSO, the Phase 1 of MCOCR was complete. This report is available on DTIC: [AD1079774](#). Links to other project reports from Phase 2 are provided on the next page.

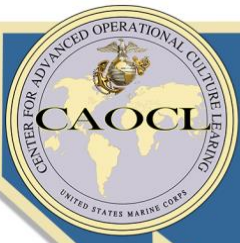
Initial release of this report was scheduled for May 2018. Release was delayed due to leadership questions about the applicability of MCU's academic freedom policy. These questions were resolved in September 2019. The release resulted in **media and Congressional attention**. See **additional information on page 4 of this document**.

The **second phase** of MCOCR was intended to have three parts:

- Correct errors in the transcripts and removing protected information to develop them into a dataset that TRG could mine on a broad range of issues of interest to the Marine Corps.
- Conducting deeper and more structured analyses on issues of interest to the Marine Corps and topics of scholarly value.
- Continuing to advise Marine Corps organizations based on MCOCR and other datasets as requested.

The Marine Corps' decision to close CAOCL and, consequently, disband TRG in June 2020 altered the plans and timelines for the second phase. Original analysis plans for Phase 2 also were disrupted by TRG's inability to procure necessary analytic software and the delay associated with academic freedom questions. These factors significantly reduced the scope of analysis planned for Phase 2. **See additional information below.**

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Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research Phase 2

Advising

The TRG team continued to provide advice for problem framing and the development of more structured data gathering efforts to various Marine Corps organizations, including M&RA and TMOD until TRG was disbanded. Dr. Foshier continues to provide advice based on the project.

Dataset Development

Work to correct errors in the transcripts and remove protected information was completed in January 2020. This work ensured the transcripts could be analyzed accurately. It also allowed the transcripts to be placed in a repository for use by other researchers (see below).

Completed Analyses

Due to the limitations imposed by lack of software and impending closure, TRG focused on completing several "quick look" reports on different topics rather than the in-depth analyses originally planned. The following additional reports were completed and posted on DTIC:

- Insights from the MCOCR Project: Implicit and Explicit Perceptions of Fairness (DTIC [AD1079415](#))
- Insights from the MCOCR Project: Pregnancy Loss (DTIC [AD1085324](#))
- Insights from the MCOCR Project: Alcohol (DTIC [AD1091445](#))
- Insights from the MCOCR Project: Rethinking Mentorship (DTIC [AD1096699](#))
- Insights from the MCOCR Project: Trust in the Marine Corps – the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly (DTIC [AD1103134](#))
- Insights from the MCOCR Project: Sexual Assault and Harassment (DTIC [AD1103136](#))
- Insights from the MCOCR Project: Empathy in Leadership (DTIC [AD1102322](#))
- Insights from the MCOCR Project: Generational Differences in the Marine Corps – Exploring Issues and Frictions Between Older and Younger Marines (DTIC [AD1102357](#))
- Insights from the MCOCR Project: Elements and Antidotes for Disillusionment (DTIC [AD1102323](#))

All reports from the project were submitted to the Defense Technical Information Center for posting on the public portal. See also the section on data management below for additional locations and materials.

Scholarly Works

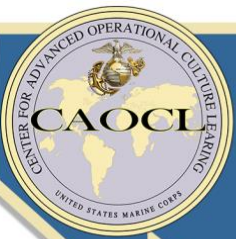
TRG team members presented on aspects of the MCOCR project at numerous academic conferences and in Marine Corps meetings. One scholarly article was published and another is in development as of this date:

- Translational Research in a Military Organization: The Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research Project. Feb 2020 in *Annals of Anthropological Practice*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/napa.12130>
- Post-Heroic Leadership in a Heroic Organization: The Secret and Gendered Life of Empathy in the United States Marine Corps. (article in development by team member).

Long-Term Data Management/ Data Availability for Future Research

Protection of the Marines who volunteered for the project and the data they provided was a priority for TRG. However, TRG also felt a responsibility to ensure that the data provided by Marines was used to the maximum extent possible. The principal investigator worked with the Marine Corps' Human Research Protection Program to identify a data repository that balanced internal and external discoverability with necessary security. After reviewing several options, the **Qualitative Data Repository** (QDR) was selected. Versions of transcripts that have been scrubbed of protected information, along with project documentation and reports, were deposited in the QDR when CAOCL closed. They can be accessed at <https://doi.org/10.5064/F6K4IVEP>. Reports and other documentation are available to the public. Access to the transcripts requires an approved human subjects protection protocol that meets [criteria](#) specified in the project documentation. Reports also are being posted to the [Open Anthropology Research Repository](#) during September of 2022.

Some materials from the project, but not the data, also were included in the CAOCL collection provided to the [Archives Branch](#) of the Marine Corps History Division at MCU and reports were posted on DTIC. The original audio recordings, raw transcripts, and any materials that could link participants with the data were destroyed when TRG was closed.



Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research Frequently Asked Questions

What was MCOOCR?

The MCOOCR Project was a small, exploratory, qualitative research effort intended to gather U.S. 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 by the Translational Research Group (TRG) at the Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning (CAOCL) under Marine Corps University's (MCU) academic freedom policy.

How should the information in MCOOCR reports be used?

Because of the non-representative sample, data and analysis from MCOOCR were intended to inform discussions in conjunction with other information sources. They should not be used to make broad, statistical 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 had implications for internal Marine Corps messaging.

What are the project's limitations?

1. The MCOOCR 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 on DTIC ([AD1079774](#)).
2. The project did not include Marines in the reserves or recently retired/separated Marines due to Marine Corps interpretation of DoD policy on information collections at the time the research was designed.
3. The project's designers did not actively seek volunteers above E-8 and O-5; therefore, senior voices are not strong in the sample.

Who funded and sponsored the project?

The project fell within the normal scope of work of 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 assisted with logistics, travel for research team members who were not part of TRG, and funding to accelerate transcription of audio recordings.

When and where were data gathered?

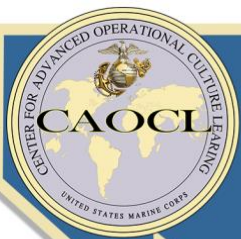
Between August and October 2017, the research team gathered data at the following locations: Pentagon, Marine Corps Base (MCB) Quantico, VA, MCB Camp Lejeune, NC, Marine Corps Air Station (MCAS) Cherry Point, NC, MCB Camp Pendleton, CA, Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center 29 Palms, CA, MCAS Yuma, AZ, and MCB Camp Butler, Okinawa, Japan.

Can Marines who participated be identified?

Identification is unlikely. Marines who volunteered for the research went through an informed consent process that warned them of the risks and the steps the research team would take to mitigate them. (A copy of the informed consent information is available in the project documentation through the [Archives Branch](#) of the Marine Corps History Division at MCU or the [Qualitative Data Repository](#) at Syracuse University.) Names were removed from the dataset and other measures were taken to mask identities, but Marines were cautioned prior to agreeing to participate in an interview or focus group, during the informed consent process, that it might still be possible for some readers to identify them through their habits of speech and/or combinations of characteristics, such as MOS and location.

What were the qualifications and characteristics of the research team?

The principal investigator was 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 MCOOCR research team changed between 2017 and 2020, but team members possessed PhDs or MAs in the following disciplines: cultural anthropology, sociology, cultural geography, international relations, education, communication, and evaluation science. Additionally, the project's design was peer reviewed by a DoD scientist with a PhD in psychology. 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 were 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 and behavioral scientists and Marines during design and analysis.



Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research Media and Congressional Attention and Marines United Background

Timeline and Background:

The initial MCOCR report was delivered to the Marine Corps on 30 Mar 2018. The Translational Research Group's (TRG) original agreement to conduct the project included public release of all outcomes under Marine Corps University's (MCU) academic freedom policy. However, release of project outcomes was delayed for 17 months due to Marine Corps leadership questions about the applicability of academic freedom policy to the project. After materials were released in September 2019, they received light attention in the media and Congress, examples of which are provided below.

Briefs to Congressional Staff

A team including the MCOCR Project's Principal Investigator, Dr. Kerry Fosher, BGen Daniel Shipley, then Director of Manpower Plans and Policies, and Dr Michael Strobl, then Deputy Director of Manpower Plans and Policies, briefed Military Legislative Assistants from the Senate on 07 February 2020 and from the House on 04 March 2020. BGen Robert Fulford, Legislative Assistant to the Commandant, and staff from the Office of Legislative Affairs also participated in the brief to Senate Military Legislative Assistants. (The brief to House staffers was truncated due to growing concerns over the COVID19 pandemic, which was emerging at that time.)

Media Coverage

To our knowledge, no major news outlets covered the MCOCR project. It received some attention on social media sites such as LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook in both military- and social science-related channels. It also was covered by some military-focused media outlets. Two examples of coverage are:

- Szoldra, Paul. 2019. [An internal investigation spurred by a nude photo scandal shows just how deep sexism runs in the Marine Corps](#). Task and Purpose. 04 Dec.
- Pawlyk Oriana. 2019. [Commandant Responds to Troubling Study on Marine Corps Culture](#). Military.com. 07 Dec.

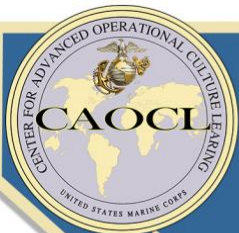
Congressional Hearing

To our knowledge, the MCOCR Project was discussed in only one public hearing. In the 10 Dec 2019 hearing, LtGen Michael Rocco, Deputy Commandant for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, the sub-committee chair, Rep Jackie Speier, and Rep Susan Davis, briefly discussed the Marine Corps' handling of the report, challenges with Marine Corps culture, concepts of equity and parity, and the importance of empathy in the professional development of Marines.

- U.S. House Armed Services Committee Subcommittee on Military Personnel Hearing, "[Diversity in Recruiting and Retention: Increasing Diversity in the Military – What the Military Services are Doing](#)," Dec 10, 2019. The project is discussed or mentioned at:
 - [1:16:40](#) (LtGen Rocco briefly mentions the MCOCR initial report in his testimony)
 - [1:18:21](#) (Rep Speier and LtGen Rocco discuss the delayed release of the initial report and some aspects of its contents)
 - [1:31:08](#) (LtGen Rocco, responding to Rep Susan Davis, raises the report in his remarks on teaching empathy).

Marines United Background

In early March of 2017, The War Horse and Reveal from the Center for Investigative Reporting published a piece on a Facebook group called Marines United ([See Thomas James Brennan, 4 Mar 2017](#)). Members of the group had created linked Google Drive folders and posted photographs of women—some naked, some clothed—as well as personally identifying information and hostile comments about women. Some of the women targeted were Marines. At the time of the reporters' investigation, the Facebook group had over 30,000 members, some of whom were later determined to be active duty Marines. The investigations in the year following the initial news coverage identified 97 Marines as possible culprits. There were a range of punishments according to reporting in The Marine Corps Times ([See Shawn Snow 21 Mar 2018](#)). A brief overview of the legal actions taken was provided in a 2018 article in Military.com ([See Hope Hodge Seck 13 Sep 2018](#)). Although there were other signs of hostile behavior and social media-based misconduct that concerned the Marine Corps, the media attention and congressional scrutiny surrounding Marines United meant that it served as the primary frame for much of the subsequent discussion and action by the Marine Corps. Those actions included the formation of a task force and launching a number of initiatives. These efforts are not well documented in public Marine Corps reports, but news coverage and congressional testimony can be found via internet and library searches.



Translational Research Group Background – Page 1 of 3

Timeline and Background:

General Background: The Translational Research Group (TRG) was a multi-disciplinary group of social scientists that operated from 2010 to 2020. The group was located within the Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning (CAOCL), which was responsible for providing culture-related, regional, and language education and training to the U.S. Marine Corps. Originally part of the Training and Education Command headquarters, CAOCL was reorganized and became part of Marine Corps University in 2012.

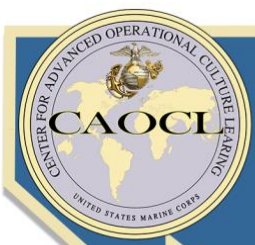
The idea for the group grew out of discussions between the anthropologist who became its director and Marine Corps leaders, one of whom was the Director of CAOCL. They had seen many problems in the Marine Corps' ability to leverage research results and scientific expertise. Many problems seemed to arise from the lack of persistent presence of scientific researchers in the Marine Corps' supporting establishment. Sometimes, researchers lacked sufficient understanding of the military and its context to design effective and useful research. Sometimes military leaders did not have enough experience with scientists to know how to interact with them and how to frame questions to ensure results were usable. Often, the long lag time between completion of a research project and implementation of results meant that researchers were no longer available when the Marine Corps had questions about how to use the knowledge developed through a research effort. Having researchers on site and employed full time, rather than on a project-by-project basis, was intended to help mitigate some of these problems.

In addition to attempting to work on the challenges above, TRG also was an experiment in the interaction of the social sciences with the military. It was formed at a time when tensions were very high between social science professional associations and military organizations. The tension was a renewal of mutual mistrust that emerged during and after past periods of engagement, most notably in World War II and the 1960s and 70s. As a result of these tensions, the resulting lack of familiarity on both sides, and unrelated changes in the civilian personnel system, most military organizations became undesirable employment options for social scientists who wanted to maintain their professional identities. Even setting aside the problems working with the military could cause in academic professional circles, the working conditions were not appropriate for retaining expertise. Job duties as civil servants or contractors did not include time for maintaining and advancing professional knowledge and networks, there was little support for publication, attending conferences, and other normal scientific work, and there were very few career tracks that allowed a scientist to advance while maintaining a scientific identity rather than becoming a rank-and-file manager. These conditions were mitigated to some degree for those working in military colleges and universities, but even in those settings, support for professional development was limited and research involving fieldwork was not easily accommodated. Taking a civil service or contract job supporting a military organization was, too often, a professional death sentence. TRG attempted, with a mix of success and failure, to address these problems by creating an environment that provided military officials with access to social science expertise, but also established more viable working conditions.

TRG drew its name and general orientation from the concept of translational research in medicine and other sciences, which emphasizes the ability to move knowledge from research to application quickly through increased communication between researchers and practitioners and by other means. The translational research concept in TRG differed somewhat from applied research in the military context because it included basic or foundational research. It emphasized continued scientific rigor and researcher control over design and execution with increased attention to the questions, ideas, and needs of potential end users and greater awareness of the implementation context.

People: The director of TRG, Dr. Kerry Fosher, was a civil servant at the GS-14 level whose PhD was in cultural anthropology. Although the original intent was to create government positions for the researchers, it was never possible to accomplish that goal and the group was staffed with full time contractors. Another aspect of the original intent was to focus recruitment on people from the fieldwork-focused social sciences, such as anthropology, geography, sociology, and similar fields at the PhD level. Hiring into civil service or contract positions is never a simple process and at no time was TRG completely staffed as intended. At various points, TRG had researchers with MAs or PhDs in disciplines including cultural anthropology, cultural geography, education, educational psychology, international relations, international studies, biological anthropology, and cognitive psychology. It also developed close collaborative relationships with several other researchers with backgrounds in sociology, social psychology, inter-cultural communication, and other disciplines, as well as collaborative relationships with military personnel from a wide range of backgrounds. Although the range of disciplines was not what was intended, researchers with different degree backgrounds brought other capabilities that turned out to be highly valuable. The number of researchers in the group varied over the years based on CAOCL's funding and the details of contracts, but averaged six researchers, not including the director.

Resources: TRG was funded out of CAOCL's budget rather than on a project-by-project basis, although it did occasionally take supplemental funding to enhance staffing or support requirements for particular projects. This approach to funding ensured that researchers would persist in the context, enabling them to advise on implementation of research results and other aspects of the selection and use of science. Funding the group in this way also had downsides. CAOCL had to focus on its core mission to provide education and training, which sometimes led to



Translational Research Group Background – Page 2 of 3

Functions: Although TRG's areas of emphasis changed somewhat over the course of the 10 years it existed, most of its work fell into three categories:

- research, advising, and outreach
- support to CAOCL
- assessment.

Research, Advising, and Outreach

TRG did not accept tasks in the way many research entities working with or within the military did during this time period. Project ideas might come from researchers, Marines, or other Marine Corps organizations. However, selection of projects was at the discretion of TRG's director, with approval by CAOCL's director. The intent was to ensure that the group conducted projects within its available range of expertise and resources and only on questions that the team found valid rather than having to respond to requests that might not have been a good fit with the group's capabilities or that would have challenged its integrity. This level of autonomy was highly unusual in DoD and frequently challenged, but necessary for the group to function as designed. Most research efforts focused on issues related to Marines and Marine Corps organizations such as stress and resilience, gender bias, humanitarian assistance missions, and cultural patterns in the Marine Corps. Projects leveraged the strengths of the team at any given time, but emphasized field research, including observation, semi-structured interviews, and semi-structured focus groups. A core strength of TRG was to bring Marine voices into discussions largely dominated by survey research and other quantified data.

The group provided a great deal of scientific advising to the Marine Corps and other DoD organizations. Originally envisioned as work that would focus on implementation of results, this line of activity expanded and became one of the most valuable aspects of TRG's work. Rather than focusing exclusively on implementation of its own results, TRG researchers also came to be valued for the advice they could provide based on their existing expertise, helping Marine Corps leaders scope problems, design research approaches, and evaluate research claims from other projects. Advisory conversations did not usually result in artifacts like reports or publications but rather in improved decision-making. However, it was one of the most valuable services TRG researchers provided.

Researchers also engaged in outreach through presenting work to scholarly and practitioner audiences, teaching guest classes and electives within Marine Corps University and elsewhere, publishing, and becoming involved in the professional associations of their disciplines. This outreach helped inform academic audiences about military personnel and served to improve relations between the military, academic social scientists, and scientific professional associations.

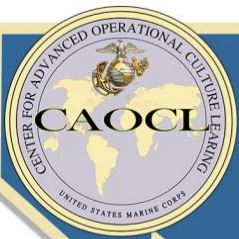
Support to CAOCL

TRG supported CAOCL's education, training, and policy sections in a variety of ways. Researchers reviewed and wrote inputs on doctrine and policy, advised on approaches to assessment, and occasionally supported training sessions with instruction. However, the most significant support it provided was in the area of culture general curricula, which provided Marines with the concepts and skills needed to operate effectively when they do not have sufficient/current culture-specific information. Although CAOCL had adopted the 5 dimensions model in 2009 (see *Operational Culture for the Warfighter* by Salmoni and Holmes Eber, 2008 and 2011), it was primarily used as a means of organizing regional or culture-specific material. The generalizable concepts and skills were not an integral part of curricula. For the first 5 years of its existence, TRG led the effort to integrate culture general material, first in CAOCL's distance education program and later in its training program. This work sometimes involved developing curricula or reference materials and at other times focused on advising CAOCL's sections about what should be included. Once the Professor of Military Cross-Cultural Competence (PM3C) was hired to be part of CAOCL and a member of the university's faculty, TRG was able to transition leadership of these efforts to her with TRG researchers supporting her efforts.

Assessment

TRG's director led CAOCL's assessment platform and TRG researchers worked with CAOCL's sections to help them design assessment approaches that would support required reporting and answer the more complex questions asked by CAOCL's director. One TRG researcher was responsible for collating annual information from the sections and using it to support various reporting requirements. TRG researchers also conducted assessment research, several examples of which are available on the Defense Technical Information Center's public portal.

Continued on next page.



Translational Research Group Background – Page 3 of 3

Balance of Functions: This arrangement of tasks could be seen as a distraction from the core work of conducting research and advising or as simply “paying rent” to TRG’s host organization, CAOCL. At times it was, but it also served a purpose. There was a reciprocal relationship between the work on training and education programs and the group’s research. The support to CAOCL’s sections and assessment work brought researchers into contact with the active duty and retired Marines in CAOCL and into discussions about Marines and the Marine Corps. In some cases, this work was a researcher’s first introduction to the Marine Corps and a useful orientation before engaging in research-related activities. It also kept the researchers tied to the sometimes-frustrating realities of trying to get science integrated in the supporting establishment, something that was an important background for science advising. In turn, the group’s research projects not only served their intended purposes, but also helped researchers develop greater knowledge of Marines and their missions, which informed their work on training and education.

Additionally, the arrangement ensured that the Marine Corps got full value from a relatively scarce commodity, fieldwork-focused social scientists. For the reasons noted above, during this time period, it was not easy to get qualified social scientists to work with the military and those employed purely in education and training sometimes struggled to maintain their professional standing or do research. TRG provided a mechanism that allowed social scientists to support education and training without losing their ability to conduct research, publish, and stay connected to their fields.

Closure: In 2019, the Marine Corps began substantial reorganizations and program cuts (referred to as divestment) in an effort to align its funding and personnel with the capabilities it believed would be necessary in future conflicts. These changes were difficult and controversial. For example, the service divested tanks, something that would have been unthinkable previously. Culture and language programs also were divested. CAOCL closed its doors on 30 Jun 2020 and, consequently, TRG was disbanded. Marine Corps University retained TRG’s director as the university-level director of research and CAOCL’s culture-focused faculty member who continued to teach across the university. Initially, a few of CAOCL’s education and training capabilities were retained in the newly formed Center for Regional and Security Studies (CRSS). However, in the two years following CAOCL’s closure, the CRSS lost staffing and funding. As of September 2022, CRSS has no dedicated funding and is staffed by one Marine officer who will not be replaced when his assignment changes, making it unlikely that the center will continue unless Marine Corps priorities change.

Of note, the other U.S. services underwent similar reductions or shifts in their culture and language capabilities during the same time period. (See *The Rise and Decline of U.S. Military Culture Programs 2004-20* Foshier and Mackenzie, eds and *The Best-Laid Schemes: A Tale of Social Research and Bureaucracy* Deitchman. Both are [available to the public via Marine Corps University Press](#).) These shifts corresponded with a number of fieldwork-focused social scientists from across the services, including TRG, leaving through retirement or transitioning to work in academia or the private sector.

Archives and Repositories: TRG has archived its materials in a number of places. The specific contents of each collection were tailored to the archive or repository.

[Marine Corps History Division Archives Branch:](#) The CAOCL Collection deposited in this archive includes materials from TRG. Materials include reports and publications, project overviews and summaries, assessment reports, and similar artifacts.

[Defense Technical Information Center:](#) TRG posted many of its research and assessment reports on DTIC. Most can be located by searching on Foshier or CAOCL.

[Qualitative Data Repository:](#) TRG deposited materials and data from four projects in the QDR. Reports, project overviews, IRB-related materials, and some data from the projects are available to the public by searching for Foshier. Access to data from two of the projects requires an IRB-approved protocol.

Marine Corps University Human Subjects Research Archive: All IRB records from TRG’s projects are retained in the university’s centralized storage. These records are accessible only to IRB-approved personnel.

[Open Anthropology Research Repository:](#) Starting in September 2022, a selection of reports from TRG is being deposited in the OARR.

For more information, contact
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MCOCR Quick-Look Report: Empathy in Leadership

Executive Summary

Using data from the Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research (MCOCR) Project, this report discusses a leadership insight from Marines: empathy is a strength and a powerful leadership tool. Some Marines talked about empathy directly, while others shared stories that illustrated empathy in leadership. Drawing from these experiences and perspectives, this report addresses the following:

- 1) Some Marines think empathy should be an organizational value, perhaps even finding its own place in the leadership acronym JJDIDTIEBUCKLE.
- 2) Marines are aware that empathy is often considered “soft” and seems at odds with the hard-charging Marine image, but some insist that empathy is actually courageous.
- 3) Empathy is often associated with women, which can be a double-edged sword for female Marines. Some Marines recognize female empathy as an asset to the Corps, while others see it as a weakness.
- 4) Empathy is something that can be learned by anyone if they are open and willing.
- 5) Marines recognize that behind a unified Marine identity, individual differences make Marines diverse. Empathy is a great tool for incorporating diversity into the force.

MCOCR Quick-Look Report: Empathy in Leadership

Introduction

Marines know leadership, and the data from the Marine Corps Organizational Research (MCOCR) Project¹ prove just that. Leadership was perhaps the most ubiquitous topic of discussion during MCOCR interviews and focus groups². Marines easily articulated what they look for and value in a good leader, sharing informed perspectives and personal stories. Many Marines spoke of an influential leader who positively impacted their career, sometimes even inspiring them to stay in the Corps after a bout with bad leadership. Some also provided insight into their own leadership journeys, detailing how they learned to lead, experiencing trial and error along the way. Needless to say, when talking about good leaders and the qualities they possess, Marines brought up many of the characteristics that are promoted in Marine organizational literature and culture and represented in the leadership acronym JJDIDTIEBUCKLE: justice, judgement, dependability, initiative, decisiveness, tact, integrity, endurance, bearing, unselfishness, courage, knowledge, loyalty, and enthusiasm.

But an unexpected characteristic came up in discussions of good leadership: empathy. Some Marine talked about empathy without ever using the word. These Marines told stories of leaders who displayed the ability to put themselves in someone else's shoes, or, conversely leaders who lacked this ability. Several Marines, on the other hand, directly and emphatically brought up the word "empathy" and discussed why it is so important for a leader. This report discusses empathy as a leadership trait that is highly valued – if not always explicitly talked about – in the Marine Corps. In addition to Marines' direct appeals to empathy, I provide stories of empathetic leadership and Marines who learned that empathy is a strength and not a weakness. Although the Marine Corps is often thought of as a place of knife-handed leadership, the MCOCR data show this "softer" leadership characteristic is valued. This unexpected insight is not only a testament to the revelatory power of exploratory qualitative research, but also just one example of how Marines themselves can provide innovative solutions to Marine Corps issues.

¹ Please see "About the Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research (MCOCR) Project" coversheet at the beginning of this report for more information on the project. For a more in-depth summary of the project and its genesis, see: Fosher, Kerry, Rebecca Lane, Erika Tarzi, Kristin Post, Gauldin, Eric, Edwards, Jennifer, and McLean, Jeremy. (2020) Translational Research in a Military Organization: The Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research Project. *Annals of Anthropological Practice*, published online 22 February 2020: volume and issue forthcoming. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/napa.12130>.

² See the following MCOCR reports for more on various aspects of leadership: (1) Lane, Rebecca, Erika Tarzi, Kristin Post, Eric Gauldin. 2018. Marines' Perspectives on Various Aspects of Marine Corps Organizational Culture. Available at: <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/1079774.pdf>; (2) Lane, Rebecca. 2019. Insights from the Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research: Implicit and Explicit Perceptions of Fairness. Available at: <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/1079415.pdf>; (3) Tarzi, Erika and Rebecca Lane. 2019. Insights from the Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research Project: Pregnancy Loss. Available at: <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1085324.pdf>; (4) Lane, Rebecca and Kristin Post. 2020. Insights from the Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research Project: Rethinking Mentorship. Report will be available on the Defense Technical Information Center public portal: <https://discover.dtic.mil/>; (5) Tarzi, Erika. 2020. Insights from the Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research Project: Trust in the Marine Corps – the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly. Report will be available on the Defense Technical Information Center public portal: <https://discover.dtic.mil/>.

JJDIDTIEBUCKLE: “I would take out one of those Es and add empathy”

JJDIDTIEBUCKLE is tried, true, and memorable. The acronym frequently passed through the lips of MCOCR Marines when asked about good leadership. The Marine Corps leadership traits it stands for are all qualities that, to varying degrees, Marines in this project appeared to value and uphold. However, some of the Marines with whom we spoke felt it was missing something from the acronym, namely empathy. In an interview, this Major A^{3,4} said of JJDIDTIEBUCKLE:

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.

Similarly, Major B⁵ said that although JJDIDTIEBUCKLE “is really good,” empathy and humility are not included in the acronym, nor are they discussed in the Marine Corps publications at any length.

JJDIDTIEBUCKLE 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 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.

Why, as Major B says, isn't empathy ever talked about? It might have something to do with Major A feeling the need to clarify that empathy is “not a touchy-feely thing where we have to give a shit about people's feelings.” That is, empathy often associated with weakness.

Reframing Empathy

2nd Lieutenant C⁶ illustrated how empathy is often construed as a weakness, joking about how some might perceive “empathy training,” if there ever were such a thing in the Marine Corps, to be setting the Corps up for failure.

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.

She suggests a redefining of courage to include standing up for someone, which in her estimation requires empathy, demonstrating what a loosening of the association between empathy and softness would look like. Likewise, Captain D⁷ talks about the connection between compassion and

³ The letters after rank are meant to avoid confusion between participants and do not in any way relate to the name of participants, which is information that we did not collect.

⁴ Participant #126, Major, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 19 September 2017.

⁵ Participant #203, Major, Focus Group, MCB Quantico, 6 September 2017.

⁶ Participant #125, 2nd Lieutenant, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 18 September 2017.

⁷ Participant #600, Captain, Interview, Pentagon, 6 September 2017.

vulnerability and how this can often be seen as a weakness, but which, in his opinion, is actually a strength that allows him to guide Marines through “real life issues.”

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 into 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.

Like 2nd Lieutenant C, Captain D offers an alternate reading of compassion. Though he has “never led Marines in battle,” Captain D portrays himself as a good leader because he has guided his Marines through traumatic life events, implicating compassion as a powerful leadership tool.

From the above quotes, it is clear that the Marines value empathy, yet see it as something that does not quite align with the “hardcore” Marine image. Empathy might be a taboo subject for some in the Marine Corps, but that does not mean it is lacking. In fact, one might argue that it is enacted in the Marine Corps ethos of “getting to know your Marines” and “taking care of your own.” This came through clearly during an all-male focus group. Early on in the focus group, 1st Sergeant E addresses the moderator's question of what makes a Marine not fit in with other Marines by bringing up the idea of the alpha male. He says, “Manliness, I think is what's expected, and if you don't bring that alpha male mentality to the pack, then you could easily be, you know, expedited [sic] or whatever, or kicked out of the pack, if you will, or not accepted within the pack.” But later in the focus group, after the moderator asks him about a previous statement where he suggested that alpha males don't have room for sensitivity, he clarifies that the alpha male mentality does not exclude the act of caring:

You know, we all go through our own issues. So, if you have a problem, well I'll easily take a step back and make sure you're taken care of. 'Cause at the same time that I'm talking to you about your problem, or engaging with that Marine, personally, inside, I'm working through my own problem that I might be going through. And, now we're spit-balling ideas back and forth. And truthfully that two-way conversation is helping both of us out.

The caring Marine that 1st Sergeant E talks about is sometimes eclipsed by the image of the hard-charging Marine. Though caring is inherently gender neutral, it is often associated with females. Although the 1st sergeant is able to hold a conceptualization of the “alpha male” that includes caring, the gendered baggage that things like “caring” and “empathy” carry is tricky for some to reconcile with the image of the hard-charging Marine.

Empathy and Gender

Empathy is a characteristic that anyone can possess, yet it is often associated with women. In the Marine Corps, this association can be a double-edged sword. Master Sergeant F made a distinction about how empathetic men are perceived versus empathetic women, insisting that women in the Marine Corps cannot afford to be as empathetic as men because they need to make

up for the fact that they are already seen as “soft.” In his experience, men get more empathetic after they join the Marine Corps and women get less empathetic. After describing how he and his wife (also a Marine) took an online test for empathy and he scored higher than his wife, he said:

I think males start down here, like, “I don't give a damn,” right? And then as we go up, you know, through the ranks and through the years, we get more empathetic. Females are the opposite. They have to be tough, they have to be rigid, they can't care and then it never changes... This shouldn't be like this, but in society usually like the males have no empathy and the females are way more empathetic. [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 PT [physical training] 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.

Master Sergeant F ended this quote by pointing out that the pairing of “female” with “empathy” can easily be seen as a weakness.

However, empathy, even when seen as a feminine characteristic, was not considered a weakness by all. Some leaders recognize the value of empathy and sometimes call upon female Marines, who they believed to possess more empathy than men, to expand their own leadership repertoire. Major G talks about how her leader, “one of the better leaders [she] worked for,” wanted her to teach him about empathy.

[H]e was really upfront, he said, “You know what?” He's like, “I don't really work with a lot of women.” He's like, “I struggle with empathy.” He's like, “Maybe you can help me balance that.” Like he saw the value that I guess maybe my gender brought. I don't know, but apparently I am supposed to have a whole bunch of empathy that would solve it, but that's what he saw when he looked at me, you know, and he was really- I appreciate his honesty about it. He's trying, you know. You just don't get that, you don't even get the impression that people are trying with that at all.

Although the major appears to question her leader's assumption that she is adept at empathy, she ultimately appreciates the effort put forth by the leader, as she does not “get the impression that people are trying with that at all.”

Empathy through Experience

The MCOCR data shows that some Marines are indeed trying to embrace empathy. Lieutenant Colonel H talks about how, before she gave birth herself, she lacked perspective and empathy when it came to the treatment of pregnant Marines, but after she became a mother, she was alarmed at how she had treated pregnant and post-partum Marines and sought to make amends.

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[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.

In insisting that, before she was able to empathize with pregnant Marines and mothers, she was “perpetuating a system that was not very accommodating,” Lieutenant Colonel H is pointing out an organizational bias that favors the male body.⁸ She also demonstrates how individuals can change and become more empathetic. While men of course cannot bear children, many male Marines in this study demonstrated a willingness to understand the experience of female Marines so that their own perspectives might be better informed. For instance, several male Marines expressed wanting to participate in mixed gender focus groups expressly because they wanted to hear about the Marine experience from a female perspective.

In the 2nd Lieutenant J'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.⁹

⁸ See the following MCOCR reports for more on this bias: (1) Lane, Rebecca. 2019. Insights from the Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research: Implicit and Explicit Perceptions of Fairness. Available at: <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/1079415.pdf>; (2) Tarzi, Erika and Rebecca Lane. 2019. Insights from the Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research Project: Pregnancy Loss. Available at: <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/pdfs/AD1085324.pdf>.

⁹ Participant #125, 2nd Lieutenant, Interview, MCAGCC Twentynine Palms, 18 September 2017.

While some Marines, like the Lieutenant Colonel H, learned empathy through their own personal experience, others learned it through witnessing their leaders, like the gunnery sergeant in 2nd Lieutenant J's story being empathetic. In both stories, empathy was extended to individuals who do not quite fit into the Marine norm.

Empathy and Diversity

Empathy is great for facilitating diversity inclusion. However, as the following two Marines illustrate, this is not necessarily about perspective taking for the sake of political correctness, something that seemed to rub a lot of Marines the wrong way. Instead, it is for the sake of accepting the undeniable reality that people are different, be those differences gender, generation, or anything else. Captain K talks about how seeing everyone as the same is an illusion that is unproductive.

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.¹⁰

Captain K relates the problem back to empathy and a lack of understanding for the ways that people are different. Although a unified Marine identity is a powerful motivator and plays an important role in fostering cohesion, there are also differences among Marines that are not changed by simply ignoring them.

This acceptance of difference can be a huge asset to leadership. Captain L 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 and bridging divides between generations,¹¹ 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." He suggested that understanding where millennials are coming from makes it easier to lead them.

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.¹²

¹⁰ Participant #058, Captain, Focus Group, MCAS Cherry Point, 24 August 2017.

¹¹ For more on MCOCR data concerning generational divides in the Marine Corps, see: (1) Gauldin, Eric. 2020. Insights from the Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research: Elements and Antidotes for Disillusionment. Report will be available on the Defense Technical Information Center public portal: <https://discover.dtic.mil/>; (2) Tashev, Blago. 2020. Insights from the Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research Project: Generational Differences in the Marine Corps – Exploring Issues and Frictions Between Older and Younger Marines. Report will be available on the Defense Technical Information Center public portal: <https://discover.dtic.mil/>.

¹² Participant #600, Captain, Interview, Pentagon, 6 September 17.

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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.

Conclusion

The Marines who participated in the MCOCR project expressed a desire to be part of the solution. Across TRG's projects and in our experience working with Marines, when it comes to leadership issues, targeting toxic leadership is a frequent topic of discussion, while bolstering good leadership sometimes plays second fiddle. Yet, the Marines highlighted in this report see the value in fostering the positive characteristic of empathy. Several Marines suggested that empathy can even be made into an organizational value, perhaps even finding a place in JJDIDTIEBUCKLE. Some address the fact that empathy is not always seen as "strong," but they offer a reframing of the concept to show how empathy is a strength to any leader. Marines shared personal stories of how they learned empathy and employ it in their careers. For many, it is not about political correctness, but instead facing the fact that, behind their shared identity, Marines possess qualities – such as gender, race, socio-economic background and age – that make them different. These differences are not going away, so instead of getting upset that different people have different needs, the Marines in this report suggest that empathy can be used to understand those different needs and experiences and to lead in a way that works *with* instead of against the diversity of the Corps.