

Perceptions of Sexual Harassment Training in the Marines Corps

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ABSTRACT- This qualitative study examines the effectiveness of sexual harassment training programs within the United States Marine Corps. It points to dissatisfaction with existing training modalities and underlines the need for this to change if a culture of respect and responsibility were ever possible. Although these programs provide the necessary training to combat sexual harassment in theory, there is an overall perception discrepancy in how Marines interpret and understand the term sexual harassment, which affects command climate as a result of lower appearance on integrity violations by marines. Data were collected through semi-structured interview questions from 15 Marines stationed in a Headquarters Battalion for at least one year of duty to evaluate sexual harassment training programs and to retrieve recommendations for enhancing the effectiveness of their organizational human behaviors. The three central themes or strategies that emerged to assess the Marine Corps' sexual harassment training programs effectively were training perceptions, impacts on attitude, and cultural factors.

Keywords: Sexual harassment, training programs, respect and accountability, integrity and morale.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Sexual harassment in the military is not merely externally an enduring problem, but it is internally a crisis that undermines the core of our nation's Marine Corps: honor and readiness. Despite numerous programs designed to combat the issue, including substantial amounts of training in this area, incidences of sexual harassment and assault persist, which brings into question the very values and mission of the Marine Corps [1]. This research attempts to shine a light on the state of sexual harassment training from within the Marine Corps and, most importantly, how effective it is or is proving to be at preventing and ending such atrocities. The goal is to provide actionable, unignorable suggestions for change as soon as possible to create a frame of mind that prioritizes accountability and dignity. The study will also aid in affirming positive organizational behavior and human resource management within the Marine Corps and reinforce safe and inclusive environments for all Marines.

2. BACKGROUND

The then Commandant of the Marine Corps, Robert Cushman, 1972 emphasized the need to promote professionalism to garner respect and diversity while inspiring mutual understanding and communication [1]. Over the years, even though efforts have been made to address this problem, significant episodes of sexual harassment and assault occurred, such as the Tailhook scandal in 1991 and multiple volumes of sexual misconduct issues at Aberdeen Proving Ground in 1996 [3]. Taking place in the halls of our military academies, these incidents are illustrative examples and sad proof that we still have a long way to go in combating sexual harassment within military units but also expose the long-term work that remains with the organizational culture throughout all branches of our armed forces.

The events that unfolded in the aftermath of these high-profile incidents have a groundswell of demands for transparency and accountability, as well as more holistic approaches for transparency, accountability, and systemic change to address sexual harassment and prevent it from happening inside the ranks [4]. These incidents shed light on the systemic issues in military power dynamics, accountability, and cultural norms throughout the military system. Many of us came together to reexamine policies and practices to help ensure the safety of all service members [3]. These efforts require trained personnel, established professional paths of action, and zero tolerance for harassment in an organization that values drains and plasticity, like the military [5].

3. PROBLEM STATEMENT

Sexual harassment in the U.S. Marine Corps, despite a massive internal training program, remains a severe problem throughout the service. For example, in 2022, there were 1,419 documented cases of sexual harassment across the branches of the U.S. military, as reported by the Department of Defense (DoD) [6]. Current training programs — mainly in the form of dull PowerPoint presentations — have not been very successful at conveying just how severe sexual harassment is. These programs should be examined in terms of effectiveness and with fresh ideas to make training exciting and fruitful.

4. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main goal of this study is to evaluate Marines' perceptions of the sexual harassment training they have received, assess how the training impacts their attitudes towards sexual harassment, and identify potential improvements to enhance the training program's effectiveness. The findings of this study may have the potential to significantly improve the current state of sexual harassment training in the Marine Corps, thereby contributing to fostering a culture of respect and dignity.

5. LITERATURE REVIEW

5.1 Organizational Culture and Learning

Building on an earlier work by Schein (1992) [7], who proposed a framework for organizational culture that emphasizes the role of shared fundamental assumptions which are implicit, underlying and deeply rooted in an organization, Origins in the history (historical context), leadership philosophies, and experiences of an organization's members collectively form the assumptions about how the world works itself to create what Edgar Schein called 'organizational culture,' for they govern behavioral norms across different levels of an organization [7]. Schein posits three nested levels of organizational culture — artifacts, espoused values, and basic underlying assumptions [5]. Observers can directly perceive the artifacts of an organization—dress codes, office designs, rituals, or ceremonies—which are material outcomes representing the values they encode (Schein 1992). On the other hand, espoused values are stated or intended values that guide day-to-day operations if they reflect the organization's actual behaviors or norms [5]. At the bottom of the hierarchy lie basic underlying assumptions—deep-rooted behaviors that are so familiar that they form part of the organizational culture and guide its values and behavior [5].

Organizations that address the levels of complexity required by cultural transformation have real-life data to initiate significant change [5, 7]. For example, to stop sexual harassment in the workplace, an organization must locate and dismantle some fundamental beliefs about power relations and sex stereotypes and battle resolution to command real change [5]. This proactive approach facilitates the establishment of authentic and enduring cultural shifts that resonate with the organization's values and foster a more inclusive and positive work environment.

5.2 Organizational Change

Organizational change serves as a critical tool in addressing systemic issues within workplaces, with sexual harassment being a prominent area that necessitates transformation. Kotter's seminal work on *Leading Change* provides a comprehensive strategic framework for effectively managing organizational change processes [8]. Kotter's [8] model offers valuable insights into navigating complex transformative endeavors by highlighting the importance of strong leadership, clear communication, and active employee engagement [8]. Following Kotter's [8] model, organizations can strategically guide their change efforts to create a culture prioritizing respect, inclusivity, and a zero-tolerance policy towards harassment.

Implementing Kotter's [8] model in the context of combating sexual harassment also enables organizations to address underlying issues and proactively foster a safer work environment. By emphasizing the role of impactful leadership, Kotter's [8] framework underscores leaders' need to champion cultural shifts and advocate for a workplace free from harassment. This includes specific actions such as establishing clear anti-harassment policies, providing ongoing education and training sessions, creating a supportive environment where complaints can be safely reported, and demonstrating a zero-tolerance stance through consistent and fair enforcement of policies.

Transparent communication, another critical aspect highlighted by Kotter [8], ensures that employees are informed, involved, and empowered throughout the change process. This facilitates an open dialogue and accountability culture, where information flows freely, and everyone understands their role in maintaining a harassment-free environment [8]. Additionally, as advocated by Kotter's [8] model, active employee engagement encourages staff to contribute their perspectives, ideas, and feedback. This creates a sense of ownership and personal investment in cultivating a respectful, inclusive organizational culture that upholds shared values and principles. By engaging all employees from every level of the organization, we can create a collective culture dedicated to wiping down harassment and producing an environment where everybody feels safe and respected. Organizations that wish to mitigate sexual harassment have the most potential benefit when incorporating Kotter's [8] strategic approach to organizational change. Utilizing the structured steps of Kotter's model can allow organizations to successfully navigate change initiatives, address root causes of harassment systematically, and foster a workplace where dignity, equity, respect, and professionalism in conduct are the norm [8]. By deliberately implementing Kotter's recommended strategies, organizations can not only combat instances of sexual harassment but also cultivate a work environment where all individuals feel valued, respected, and supported, contributing to a positive and harmonious organizational climate.

5.3 Organizational Learning

As articulated in Senge's concept of the "learning organization," organizational learning plays a crucial role in shaping workplace attitudes and behaviors. Further, in such a culture where learning is continuous and reflective as well as adaptive,

organizations can solve issues like sexual harassment through educational programs or awareness initiatives. Senge's framework underscores the importance of creating a supportive environment where individuals are encouraged to expand their knowledge, reflect on experiences, and adjust behaviors to promote respect and inclusivity [9].

Integrating Senge's principles of organizational learning enables organizations to equip employees with the skills and awareness needed to recognize and prevent harassment while fostering a culture of mutual respect, accountability, and empathy. By adopting a holistic approach that targets cultural norms, individual behaviors, and organizational structures, organizations can create a workplace environment that upholds values of dignity, equality, and intolerance towards harassment, thus promoting a harmonious and supportive atmosphere for all employees [9].

5.4 Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment, a complex social phenomenon, involves intricate intersections with power dynamics, gender roles, and the prevailing organizational culture. Studies conducted by Sciarrino and Warnecke [10] shed light on the pervasive and detrimental effects of sexual harassment, not only on individual victims but also on team dynamics and organizational performance at large. Tatum and Ugurluoglu [11] highlighted how experiences of sexual harassment can lead to psychological distress, reduced job satisfaction, and increased turnover rates among employees affected. Similarly, Cortina et al. [12] highlighted the broader consequences of harassment on team dynamics, including how it lowers morale and erodes trust within workgroups where harassment is common. The study documents the urgent call for organizations to combat sexual harassment in a more holistic way to protect employee health and preserve a positive organizational climate when incidents do occur.

To effectively combat sexual harassment, researchers stress the importance of implementing comprehensive policies, targeted training programs, and robust support mechanisms within organizations. Tatum, A. K., & Ugurluoglu [11] advocate for developing clear and enforceable policies that delineate unacceptable behaviors, establish reporting procedures, and outline offender disciplinary actions. Likewise, Kuntz and Searle [13] emphasize the role of educational initiatives that raise awareness about harassment, promote bystander intervention, and cultivate a culture of respect and inclusivity. By integrating these recommendations into organizational practices, businesses can create a proactive environment that not only prevents harassment but also responds swiftly and effectively when such behaviors arise, thus fostering a workplace culture that values the well-being and dignity of all employees [13, 11].

5.5 Training

A proper training program empowers, enlightens, and changes the organizational culture where individuals work respectfully and equally. Drawing on the work of Kuntz and Searle [13], proactive bystander intervention training was highlighted as a

critical approach in giving employees agency to identify and act upon incidents of sexual harassment, thus reducing their prevalence. When organizations provide Bystander Intervention Training for all their employees, they are armed with the tools and mechanisms necessary to intervene, help a victim, and proactively create an environment that allows no room for harassment.

Building on that, Sciarrino and Warnecke [10] noted leadership support and organizational commitment within training programs to combat workplace harassment as essential to program effectiveness. When leaders support training, this sends a message that this is a priority for the organization. It sets the tone for engaging employees and inspiring them to participate in these or other types of programs' use of challenge coins. Building this kind of organizational culture can create both levels of individual accountability and openness in reporting, simultaneously fostering a positive training environment that reinforces a zero-tolerance stance towards harassment, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and respectful work environment for all employees [14]

5.6 Turnover and Performance

Sexual harassment negatively impacts employee performance and turnover in organizations. Employees or individuals in organizations who experience sexual harassment often face psychological distress that leads to lower employee job satisfaction and organizational productivity. Alrawadieh et al. [15] used the Conservation of Resources Theory (COR) to analyze relationships between sexual harassment, turnover, psychological well-being, and job satisfaction among Turkish female tour guides. In their conclusion, Alrawadieh et al. [15] found that sexual harassment experience negatively affected job satisfaction and psychological well-being. The findings also confirmed the mediating effects of employee turnover on the relationship between sexual harassment and job satisfaction, as well as the relationship between sexual harassment and psychological well-being. Ng et al. [16] added that the constant anxiety and fear of encountering harassment can result in diminished focus, creativity, and overall engagement with work because the environment not only affects the victim but can also create a toxic atmosphere that undermines team dynamics, morale, and collaboration among colleagues.

Moreover, the effects of sexual harassment may influence employee turnover because the victims of harassment may feel compelled to leave their jobs to escape the hostile environment, which may contribute to increased turnover. Chagadama et al. [14] stated that high turnover rates can be costly and lead to an organization's financial burdens associated with hiring, training, and losing experienced employees. Additionally, the loss of skilled employees can disrupt workflow and hinder team cohesion, ultimately affecting the organization's overall performance. Organizations that fail to address sexual harassment effectively risk long-term damage to their culture and reputation. Unsafe or unwelcoming workplaces or environments can deter potential talent, making attracting and retaining skilled employees difficult. It is paramount for organization leaders or managers to implement appropriate

policies and foster an inclusive environment to mitigate all negative behaviors, such as sexual harassment, to enhance employee satisfaction and loyalty. By prioritizing a culture of respect and accountability, organizations protect their employees and cultivate a more productive and stable workforce.

6. METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

6.1 Methodology

The research study utilized a qualitative approach to delve into Marines' perspectives on the current sexual harassment training within the Marine Corps. Based on the definitions proposed by Corbin and Strauss [17], qualitative research aims to elucidate, comprehend, and generalize knowledge about phenomena by not using statistical procedures and focusing on insights and understanding rather than quantification. The mixed methodology, which relies on both qualitative and quantitative methods, was not appropriate for the current study as we did not have numerical data that would lend itself to hypothesis testing or formal analysis of independent variables associated with perceptions of sexual harassment in the Marine Corps.

6.2 Design

Various designs exist in qualitative methodology. This study used a phenomenological design because it aligns with the research objectives, data requirements, and existing knowledge on the subject. Phenomenology was also favored for exploring Marines' perceptions without delving into causal questions and understanding how individuals construct meaning and experience their training in the Marine Corps. Other designs, such as a case study focused on exploring a single phenomenon bound in time or ethnography to explore the beliefs or cultures of participants, were not appropriate. Moreover, a narrative design focused on exploring participants' personal lives was also inappropriate for this study.

7. RESEARCH AND INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The research question of this study was: How do Marines perceive the sexual harassment training in the Marine Corps? We used eight interview questions for this study:

- What is your gender, school level completed, and current Marine Corps rank?
- How do current Marine Corps training programs impact Marine's attitudes toward sexual harassment?
- What are your views concerning sexual harassment in the Marine Corps?
- Have you ever been a victim or experienced sexual harassment in your workplace or during your training sessions?
- How do you understand or report sexual harassment if it happens to you?
- What will be the best way to increase awareness of sexual harassment and prevent it?
- How does your superior respond to sexual harassment threats made against you or your colleagues?
- Does your unit experience sexual harassment threats? If yes, can you describe the risks and actions to mitigate them?

8. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

8.1 Data Collection

The data for this study was collected through face-to-face semi-structured interview questions with participants who voluntarily agreed to participate. Participants were selected using sampling methodology. Before the interview, participants were aware of the phenomenon analyzed. The interviews were held during the time and lunch break and lasted about 35 minutes for each participant.

The study targeted 15 participants of any gender, race, or rank who had served in the Marine Corps for at least one year. The number of participants was limited to 15 to ensure that each participant had enough time to respond to the interview questions. For privacy and confidentiality, the names of participants were coded as M01, M02..., M15. Participants were leveraging a small yet focused sample aligned with the principles of phenomenology to capture detailed insights and interpretations on sexual harassment training experiences, ensuring depth and richness in understanding individual perspectives and facilitating a nuanced analysis of the research findings [10, 18, 11].

As researchers, our primary goal was to ensure the sample size was large enough to manage and aggregate valuable data for the research study. We also ensured the sample size was large enough to obtain data saturation to enhance the study's reliability. Ritter et al. [19] described researchers as reaching data saturation when no new information emerged. We reached data saturation after interviewing the 15 participants.

8.2 Data Analysis

To analyze data, we used NVivo 12. NVivo 12 helped to codify and categorize data based on emerging themes and data similarities. For our data triangulation, we explored internal camps, army, and government documentation and technical reports to examine the research question and the impacts of sexual harassment on the Marine Corps. After collecting data from semi-structured interviews and army and government sources, we confirmed data saturation after interviewing the fifteenth participant.

9. FINDINGS

Theme 1: Training Perceptions.

Marines find current training methods, particularly PowerPoint presentations, unengaging sexual harassment perceptions. Participants described the training as monotonous and uninteresting, often delivered through traditional PowerPoint presentations in large settings like base theaters. Thirteen participants attested that learning through animated PowerPoint with video and pictures helped them better understand the phenomenon with examples. Some researchers attested that good learning should occur with training interaction [10, 21]. Moreover, M03, M07, M08, M10, and M11 added that training perceptions helped to understand sexual harassment better when others might not. One participant, M08, expressed feeling that

the training sessions were "dry" and lacked engagement, while another participant, M06, suggested that smaller group settings might lead to more meaningful participation. M15 opined that "sexual harassment training is important. Let's continue to receive the training just as long as Marines violate others." M19, for instance, stated that "... Training is important because sexual harassment is still happening in the Marine Corps. I think the way it is currently given is not effective and is not useful. Marines do not go to the base theater and pay attention. They are there wondering when the training is going to be over. If training has been effective, then why are Marines still being sexually harassed? Maybe the higher-ups need to look at how to change the training." These responses indicate a desire for more interactive elements to make the training sessions more impactful and relevant. The findings underscore the need for a shift towards more engaging and interactive methods to enhance the effectiveness of sexual harassment training within the Marine Corps (Participant M08, Participant M06).

Theme 2: Impact on Attitudes

While awareness is raised, conceptions of harassment vary among Marines, which indicates a real need for clear communication. The impact of sexual harassment training on attitudes among Marines was also evident based on the mixed responses regarding how Marines understood and perceived harassment [22]. Some participants highlighted the importance of clear definitions and real-life examples, emphasizing the seriousness of sexual harassment. However, others struggled to define sexual harassment beyond labeling it as "inappropriate behavior." Twelve participants believed that Marine Corps training programs significantly impact Marines' attitudes toward sexual harassment. All participants agreed that considering the impact on attitudes during the training will be significant to improve a better understanding of sexual harassment in the Marine Corps. Moreover, the misconception among other marines in the perception of sexual attitudes will help to a more profound knowledge of sexual harassment. Moreover, a comprehensive and practical training program tailored to diverse learning styles will promote a deeper understanding and awareness of the issue among Marines (Participant M02).

Theme 3: Culture Factors.

Marines are willing to report and intervene in harassment cases from the jump. The 15 participants were eager to report and intervene in incidents of harassment, displaying a proactive attitude when dealing with these behaviors. They had a strong sense of responsibility to intervene with harassers, work with victims, and use the chain of command wisely. For instance, one participant, M03, emphasized the importance of direct communication with offenders, while another participant, M05, highlighted the need for a supportive environment that encourages reporting unwanted behavior. These responses indicate a desire among Marines to actively participate in fostering a culture of accountability and respect within the Marine Corps (Participant M03, Participant M05).

Table 1. Emerging Themes and Agreements

Nodes/ Themes	Number of Participants	% of Participants agree with themes (Sec)
Training perception	13	87
Impact on attitude	12	80
Culture factors	15	100

The results of this qualitative phenomenological study revealed that (a) training perception, (b) impact on attitude, and (c) culture should be used as practical strategies to increase sexual harassment awareness and, therefore, use these strategies as managerial tools to exterminate all sexual negative behavior or attitudes in the Marine Corps. Top or high-ranking Marine supervisors may have different strategies to mitigate or eradicate sexual harassment; however, finding appropriate strategies is crucial to ensuring a safe and positive training environment.

10. IMPLICATIONS

Influential organizational leaders or managers must promote a professional environment by identifying appropriate sexual harassment training formats to increase mutual respect and confidence [23, 10, 24]. The research findings said that Marines felt that existing training was dull, repetitive, and boring, primarily due to the traditional training format in PowerPoint method. Sexual Harassment is a problem that can be expensive and difficult to solve in any organization. Still, an added hands-on experiential learning component (skits, role-plays, real-life scenarios), i.e., induction training, could significantly help engage such Marines in the learning environment and comprehension of such harassment. As suggested by participants like M02 and M06, breaking down the concept of sexual harassment into relatable components can lead to more impactful training sessions [25].

By implementing these recommended improvements in sexual harassment training, human resource or Marine Corps managers or leaders can address harassment issues more effectively. Participants were strongly willing to report and intervene in sexual harassment cases, indicating a proactive approach toward upholding a culture of accountability and respect. The practical training methods, such as involving victims in providing their insights and experiences, as advocated by M03 and M05, can foster more profound understanding and empathy among sexual harassment victims, ultimately leading to a more supportive and inclusive work environment [10].

Additionally, by taking the entire command's feedback and adjusting based on many perspectives, the Marine Corps can become better operationally ready and increasingly exhibit higher morale by instilling trust into its systems. According to the study, these results "reinforce the importance of establishing an organization that learns and actively engages with its entire team and shows its willingness to think forward in policy change and improvement." Each of these iterations teaches Marines that sexual harassment training is more than just another checkbox; it's a program with real impact designed to

improve respect, professionalism, and accountability in the Marine Corps.

11. CONCLUSION

The study identifies significant gaps in the Marine Corps' existing sexual harassment training programs. Creating a work environment where effective and respectful communication is encouraged, and disposable training methods are replaced with engaging and interactive ones with feedback to all Marines, irrespective of rank. They are essential to the integrity of the Marine Corps and the proper care of its members, which in turn is critical to operational readiness. The study also indicated that contingent upon the individual Marine, present training is considered boring and concluded to be ineffective for preventing sexual harassment perpetration amongst service members. However, there was disagreement over whether the training had been sufficient. The study underscores the importance of enhancing the quality and delivery of sexual harassment training through more engaging and comprehensive programs to create a more inclusive and respectful environment for all.

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