Project Overview

The Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research (MCOCR) Project is an exploratory research effort requested by 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 and also from longer-term leadership questions regarding shifts in Marine Corps culture. The research is being conducted by the Center for Advanced Operational Culture’s (CAOCL) Translational Research Group (TRG) at Marine Corps University (MCU). The project is governed by Marine Corps Human Subjects Protection Protocol #USMC.2017.0005 and the provisions of academic freedom in MCU’s Academic Regulations (2016).

The intent of the project is to develop a broad base of data and analyses to provide context, considerations, and insights that can be used to inform problem-framing and decision-making on a range of issues. The project is not intended to be representative of the entire Marine Corps or to support statistical analyses. As with most exploratory research, results are intended to inform discussion rather than make claims or advance particular positions regarding any Marine Corps program or policy. Additional information is provided in the Frequently Asked Questions on page 3 of this overview.

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 Personnel Studies and Oversight (PSO) Office, now 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 first phase of MCOCR was complete.

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

- Cleaning the transcripts to correct errors 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 topics of interest to the Marine Corps and those of scholarly value
- Continuing to advise Marine Corps organizations based on MCOCR and other datasets as requested.

The Marine Corps’ decision to close CAOCL in June 2020 has altered the plans and timelines for the second phase. Original analysis plans also were delayed by TRG’s inability to procure necessary analytic software and questions regarding the applicability of MCU’s academic freedom policy to MCOCR outcomes. Questions regarding academic freedom were resolved in late 2019. These factors have significantly reduced the scope of analysis planned for Phase 2. See status update below.

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Marine Corps Organizational Culture Research
Phase 2 Status Update

February 2020

Advising
The TRG team has 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.

Dataset Development
Work to clean the transcripts to correct errors and remove protected information was completed in January 2020. This work ensures the transcripts can be analyzed accurately. Potentially, transcripts also may be able to be released to other researchers with an appropriate human subjects protection protocol approved by the principal investigator (Dr. Kerry Fosher) and the Marine Corps’ Human Research Protection Program.

Completed Analyses
Three additional reports have been finalized and released:
- Insights from the MCOCR Project: Implicit and Explicit Perceptions of Fairness
- Insights from the MCOCR Project: Pregnancy Loss
- Insights from the MCOCR Project: Alcohol

Scholarly Works
TRG team members have presented on aspects of the MCOCR project at numerous academic conferences, and several academic publications are in development. Two scholarly publications have been finalized and submitted:

Ongoing Analysis
TRG will continue to analyze MCOCR data until CAOCL ceases operations in June 2020 or until core research staff leave prior to closure. Focus areas were chosen in consultation with TMOD leadership and include “Quick Look” analyses of Marine perspectives on:
- trust
- generational differences and the roles of generational narratives
- mentorship
- diversity
- sexual assault

Additional information regarding these focus areas is available on request. Pending staff availability and other work requirements, TRG expects to produce reports on these topics by late spring 2020.

Long-Term Data Management Plans
Protection of the Marines who volunteered for the project and the data they provided is a priority for TRG. TRG also works to ensure that the data provided by Marines is used to the maximum extent possible. The principal investigator is working with the Marine Corps’ Human Research Protection Program to place the finalized transcripts into a data repository that balances internal and external discoverability with necessary security. The original audio recordings, raw transcripts, and any materials that could link participants with the data will be destroyed prior to CAOCL’s closure.

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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 MCOCR reports 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).

Can Marines who participated be identified?
Identification is unlikely. Marines who volunteered for the research went through a process that informed them of the risks and the steps the research team would take to mitigate them. (A copy of the informed consent information is available from the POC below.) Names were removed from the dataset and other measures have been taken to mask identities, but Marines were cautioned prior to agreeing to participate in an interview or focus group 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 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.