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TITLE OF RESEARCH: Study on Reducing Barriers to Minority Participation in Elite Units in the Armed Services

Introduction script

I would like to introduce myself and my colleague(s). We work for the Institute for Defense Analyses (IDA), a federally-funded research and development center (FFRDC) that conducts independent research for DoD. DoD has asked IDA to assess barriers to participation in special operations forces and other specialties as included in Sec. 557 of the FY21 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA). DoD wants to better understand Service members experiences and opinions to inform policy-making, and ultimately improve the capabilities of special operations and other specialized units in the Armed Services.

To be clear, you are being asked to take part in this research study of your own free will. If you decide not to take part, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to you. If you decide to participate, you may still withdraw from this study at any time prior to the end of this discussion, and may request that the information you provided not be used.

Before we begin, let's go over a few guidelines for our discussion

- **All discussions will be completely confidential.** Although we will be taking notes, those notes will not include your names; we will ensure that your comments cannot be linked back to you in any way. Focus group data will be reported in aggregate, with a level of detail insufficient to identify you or your unit.
- To further ensure confidentiality, we ask that **what you hear from each other remains in this room.** During our discussion, do not provide your name or the names of others here today.
- We ask that you **honestly and freely** discuss your views today. You are here with your peers and we encourage you to speak openly. There are **no right or wrong answers**; it's important that we hear a range of opinions and we want to hear from all of you.
- We are **not trying to come to a consensus** here, so please feel free to disagree or agree with others' opinions. If there is something you do not feel comfortable sharing with the group, I will remain available to hear your thoughts after the group discussion today.

Please take a moment to read the consent form in front of you. To protect your identity and maintain the confidentiality of your participation in this study, you will not be asked to sign a consent document. [Wait a couple of minutes] Does anyone have any question about the consent form? [Answer questions] As a reminder, your participation in this study must be voluntary. "Voluntary" in this context means that your potential participation is not the result of anyone requiring you to participate in this study. If you would like to voluntarily participate in this study, please nod "Yes" to indicate your consent to participate. If you prefer not to participate in this study, you may leave at any time.

*Please feel free to address any questions or concerns regarding this study with the research staff.
Does anyone have a question before we begin?*

Focus Group Questions (Operators)

Notes: SOF will be replaced with the name of each specific unit or unit type (e.g., Navy SEALs, Army Special Forces). This is a semi-structured interview; the questions selected from this guide will shift depending on the nature of the discussion. The top-level bullets are the main questions/categories to be discussed – lower level bullets may not be necessary and are only meant to provide additional probes, if needed. In the event that certain questions cannot be covered in focus group sessions due to time constraints or otherwise, the research team may hold one-on-one interviews with subjects to cover those questions.

RECRUITMENT/REASONS FOR JOINING

To begin, I would like to ask you about the process of joining SOF, from when you first learned about SOF to when you decided to join.

1. How and when did you learn about SOF?
 - a. Prior to joining the military?
 - b. Once serving in the military?
 - c. From whom or where did you hear about it?
 - i. If needed, prompt with: family, friends, other Service members, coaches or mentors, community or school event, recruiter, media, movies, or the internet

2. What made you decide to apply to SOF?
 - a. What appealed to you about serving in SOF?
 - i. Who influenced your decision to join? [If needed, prompt with: family, friends, other Service members, coaches or mentors, community or school event, recruiters, media, movies, or the internet]
 - b. Tell us about your experience being recruited for SOF
 - i. Who approached you about joining SOF? What did they say?
 - ii. Did you approach a recruiter or seek out information yourself – tell me about that process? Did you experience any challenges?
 - c. Was there anything about SOF that made you hesitant to apply?

3. What impression did you have about SOF and its members before you joined?

4. What do you think are some of the reasons other people may have for not wanting to join SOF?

5. In your opinion, are some groups of people more or less likely to join SOF? Why do you think that is?
 - a. Ethnic/racial minorities?
 - b. Women?
 - c. LGBTQ (i.e., Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and/or Queer)?
 - d. Religious minorities?
 - e. People born outside of the U.S. (i.e., immigrants)
 - f. What additional obstacles might these groups face?
 - g. In what ways has this changed or stayed the same since you first joined SOF?

6. Tell me about any involvement you have had in recruiting new members and/or spreading awareness about SOF?
 - a. How effective are current recruiting strategies?
 - b. What, if anything, would you consider changing about the current recruiting process?
 - c. Beyond current recruiting tactics, what could DoD/SOCOM do to present SOF as an option to a broader audience?
 - d. What, if anything, should SOF do to more effectively recruit women and ethnic/racial minorities?

ASSESSMENT, SELECTION, AND TRAINING

Next, I would like to ask you some questions about the SOF pre-screening, assessment, selection, and training process.

7. How did you prepare for SOF pre-screening, assessment, selection, and training?
 - a. Tell me about any training you engaged in before service or during service?
 - b. What support or preparatory resources from recruiters or other SOF/Service contacts, if any, did you receive?
8. What challenges did you face through the selection and assessment process?
 - a. How did you overcome those challenges?
 - b. Why do you think some people are unable to make it through the selection and assessment process?
 - c. Tell me about the people who most often “wash out”?
9. In your opinion, how effective is the assessment and selection process – are the most qualified people always selected in the end? Why or why not?
 - a. What could be done to improve the selection and assessment process?
10. Tell me what you think about the SOF entry, selection, and training standards. Which standards are essential? Which standards would you add, modify, or eliminate?
 - a. Are there any standards that make it harder for minority groups to join? Which ones?
 - i. Prompt with, if needed: ethnic/racial minorities, women, LGBTQ, immigrants, other
 - b. Are there any assessment and selection practices that make it harder for underrepresented or minority groups to join? Which ones?
 - i. Prompt with, if needed: ethnic/racial minorities, women, LGBTQ, immigrants, other
11. What, if anything, do you think SOF/your Service could do to prepare a broader group of people to be able to meet the standards?
12. Do you know of any change that has been made to entry, selection, or assessment requirements since you joined?

- a. Why do you think those changes were made?
- b. What impact have those changes had?
- c. Do you agree with those changes? Why or why not?
- d. Do you think SOF will make further changes? Why or why not?

CULTURE AND CLIMATE

Now I would like to turn to your thoughts about your current unit.

13. Tell me about your unit – how well do you think people get along and work together?
 - a. How well do operators and enablers (i.e., support personnel) get along and work together?
 - b. How do enablers tend to be viewed among operators?
14. How well do you think seniors, peers, and subordinates communicate in your unit?
 - a. To what extent is everyone able to be heard?
 - b. To what extent are contrarian ideas welcomed or is groupthink the norm?
15. In your opinion, to what extent do members of your unit feel included – like they belong, are valued, and can contribute to the mission?
 - a. To what extent does your unit leadership leverage the skills and contributions of all unit members?
16. In your opinion, what do members need to do to “fit in” and succeed in your unit?
 - a. What are some of the unwritten rules that unit members are expected to follow?
 - b. In what ways has this changed or stayed the same since you first joined SOF?
17. Tell me about unit members who have a hard time fitting in?
 - a. Do you think it may be harder for racial/ethnic minorities to “fit in” or feel included? Why or why not?
 - b. Do you think it may be harder for women to “fit in” or feel included? Why or why not?
 - c. Are there any other groups that may have a hard time fitting in? (e.g., religious minorities, LGBTQ, immigrants). Why or why not?
 - d. In what ways has this changed or stayed the same since you first joined SOF?
18. What is it like to join a new SOF unit?
 - a. For newly qualified Service members
 - b. For seasoned operators
 - c. Does rank matter?
19. What do you think SOF leaders should do to ensure that everyone feels part of the team and is included?
20. Do you consider your unit diverse? In what ways?

21. In what ways do you think greater diversity may help SOF? In what ways do you think greater diversity may hurt SOF?
- Do you think more racial/ethnic minorities should be serving as operators in SOF? Why? Why not?
 - [Only focus groups divided by sex] Do you think more women should be serving as operators in SOF? Why? Why not?
22. What, if anything, do you think SOF leaders should be doing to promote greater diversity and inclusion?
- What have you read/heard about SOCOM's Strategic Plan for D&I? Do you agree with this approach?

CAREER PROGRESSION AND WRAP UP

To conclude, I would like to ask you a few more questions about your career in SOF.

23. In your opinion, what does it take to advance in your career in SOF? What does it take to excel at what you do?
- Would you say career development, promotion processes, and training opportunities are fair? Why or why not?
 - Tell me about any hurdles that may hold people back from advancing, if any?
 - To what extent might race/ethnicity or gender influence how far you can go in the military profession and/or how skilled you can become?
24. What do you think are the reasons people leave SOF?
- Are there any groups that may leave earlier than others?
25. What do you think are the reasons people stay in SOF throughout their careers?
26. Is there anything else that you did not get to discuss during the focus group that you think we need to know?

If there is any additional information and/or opinion that you would like to share with us that you may not have gotten a chance to say during our discussion, please let me know; we can discuss further.

Focus Group Questions (Comparison Group/Non-Operators)

Notes: This is a semi-structured interview; the questions selected from this guide will shift depending on the nature of the discussion. The top-level bullets are the main questions/categories to be discussed – lower level bullets may not be necessary and are only meant to provide additional probes, if needed. In the event that certain questions cannot be covered in focus group sessions due to time constraints or otherwise, the research team may hold one-on-one interviews with subjects to cover those questions.

REASONS FOR JOINING/RECRUITMENT

To start with, I would like to ask you about the process of joining the military and your occupational specialty, as well as your thoughts about other specialties.

1. What made you decide to join the military and your military branch?
2. What made you decide to select your occupational specialty?
 - a. What appealed to you about your specialty?
 - i. Who and/or what influenced your decision to join? (If needed, prompt with: family, friends, other Service members, coaches or mentors, community or school event, recruiter, media, movies, or the internet)
 - i. What did he/she/they tell you about your occupational specialty?
 - b. Was there anything about your occupational specialty that made you hesitant to join?
3. Which other occupational specialties did you consider? Why did you decide against them?
4. Have you ever considered joining SOF? Why or why not?
 - a. Did anyone ever approach you about joining SOF/recruited you?
 - b. If approached about joining SOF, how and at what point in time did that happen?
 - c. If you decided against attempting to join SOF, why was that and what would have made SOF more appealing to you?
 - d. If you decided to apply, did you subsequently change your mind? Why was that and what would have made SOF more appealing to you?
 - e. If you are still eligible, would you consider applying to join SOF in the future?
5. If you wanted to join SOF, what steps would you would need to take?
 - a. Does your Service have education, training programs, or other resources to help prepare you for SOF?

AWARENESS AND IMPRESSIONS OF SOF

Next, I would like to ask you about SOF in more detail – what you know about special operation units, how you have learned about them, and your impressions about SOF.

6. Tell me what you know about SOF. In what types of training and missions do they engage?
7. When you hear SOF, what specific units come to mind? What do you know about these units?
8. How and when did you learn or hear about SOF?
 - a. If prior to joining the military, from whom?
 - b. If after joining the military, from whom?
 - c. Which specific units did you hear about?
9. What are your impressions of SOF members?
 - a. Why do you think people join SOF?
 - b. What skills or abilities do you think you need to join SOF?
10. In your opinion, are there some groups of people that are less likely to join SOF? Why do you think that is?
 - a. Ethnic/racial minorities?
 - b. Women?
 - c. LGBTQ (i.e., Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and/or Queer)?
 - d. Religious minorities
 - e. People born outside of the U.S. (i.e., immigrants)
 - f. In what ways has this changed or stayed the same since you have been in the military
11. What have you heard about the command climate in SOF units?
 - a. What are your impressions of how well people in SOF get along and work together?
 - b. Are there certain groups of people who have a harder time fitting in? Who and why?
 - c. In what ways has this changed or stayed the same since you have been in the military
12. How would you describe diversity in SOF units to others?
 - a. Is your impression that SOF units are diverse or lack diversity?
 - b. How does this compare to your own unit? The Total Force?
13. In what ways do you think greater diversity may be beneficial for SOF? In what ways do you think greater diversity may be challenging for SOF?
14. What, if anything, do you think SOF leaders should be doing to promote greater diversity and inclusion?
15. Is there anything else that you didn't get to discuss during the focus group that you think we need to know?

If there is any additional information and/or opinion that you would like to share with us that you may not have gotten a chance to say during our discussion, please let me know; we can discuss further.