

Subtask 6: 2023 Qualitative Research to Better Understand the Experiences of Racial/Ethnic Minority Service Members Focus Group Protocol

Objective: To conduct focus groups with racial/ethnic minority Service members to better understand their experiences with sexual assault, sexual or racial harassment, and racial or gender discrimination and their perceptions of the military climate as it relates to prevention and response.

NOTE TO REVIEWERS:
This discussion guide is not a script and, therefore, will not be read verbatim. The moderator will use these questions as a roadmap and will probe as needed to maintain the natural flow of the conversation.
Session Overview (90 Minutes)
Section I: Introduction (5–10 minutes)
Section II: Racial/ethnic minority Service members’ perceptions related to factors influencing sexual assault, sexual harassment, racial harassment, gender discrimination, and racial discrimination (25–30 minutes)
Section III: Racial/ethnic minority Service members’ perceptions of reasons that sexual assault, sexual harassment, racial harassment, gender discrimination, and racial discrimination continue to persist in the military (10–15 minutes)
Section IV: Racial/ethnic minority Service members’ perceptions of their risk of sexual assault, sexual harassment, racial harassment, gender discrimination, and racial discrimination (15–20 minutes)
Section V: Recommendations about what steps need to be taken to reduce the prevalence rates of sexual assault, sexual harassment, racial harassment, gender discrimination, and racial discrimination (10–15 minutes)
Section VI: Barriers to reporting incidences of sexual assault, sexual harassment, racial harassment, gender discrimination, and racial discrimination (10–15 minutes)
Section VII: Conclusion (2 minutes)

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Section I: Introduction (5–10 min)

Thank you so much for coming today—We appreciate you taking the time to talk to us. My name is _____, and I'll be moderating this group today. I am conducting this group on behalf of the Department of Defense's Office of People Analytics, also known as OPA.

For this study, I am speaking with active duty racial/ethnic minority Service members from all military service branches. Our goal is to better understand your experiences with sexual assault, sexual harassment, racial harassment, racial discrimination, and gender discrimination and your perceptions of the military climate as it relates to prevention and response. The military climate is shared feelings and perceptions of soldiers about their military unit. A military unit may refer to any organizational unit with their command structure (e.g., team, squad, squadron, section, flight, group, platoon, etc.).

Before we get started, I would like to review a few ground rules:

- Your participation is voluntary. This means that you do not have to answer a question if you do not wish to and that you may stop participating at any time.
- Please respect each other's opinions. We understand you may have different perspectives on issues covered in this focus group, but we ask that you treat everyone with dignity and respect when voicing your opinion.
- We also ask that each of you respect the privacy of others by not sharing any information that is discussed during this focus group with anyone outside of this group.
- There are no right or wrong answers. Our whole purpose for being here is to hear what you think, so please speak up.
- In a few moments, I will ask for each person's consent to begin an audio recording. These audio recordings will be used to create transcriptions of the focus group to be analyzed for our report; however, we will not be including any names or other identifying information in the transcripts and the recordings will be deleted once the transcripts are created. A few colleagues of mine will be observing and taking notes during our discussion to further facilitate our reporting. [Note for reviewers: note takers and observers who are in the room during data collection will be introduced to the group and their roles will be explained.]

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- Everything we talk about here is confidential; your individual responses will not be reported back to the DoD or your Service branch and your name will not be associated with anything you say. Each of you has a blank name placard and a Sharpie in front of you. Please write your first name on this placard, as we ask that you only use your first names during the group today and please only refer to each other using the names on the placards. Please do not use anyone's name when discussing your experiences and refrain from discussing anything we talk about today outside of this room.
- We have 90 minutes for our discussion and a lot to cover today, so part of my job is being a timekeeper. I may have to move us along at different points in our discussion to ensure we can cover everything.
- A few logistical things that are really helpful to me as a moderator:
 - Please speak up so that I and my colleagues who are notetaking can hear you clearly. This also helps make sure our audio recorder can capture your feedback.
 - How you wish to join the conversation is up to you—there is no need to raise your hand, but if you feel more comfortable raising your hand, you are welcome to do that.
 - Please try to take turns and speak one at a time and refrain from crosstalk and side conversations.
 - If you have a cell phone, please make sure the ringer is turned to silent or vibrate.
- Everybody has a blank booklet in front of them. This is your scratch pad and is yours to use throughout our discussion in a couple of ways.
 - First, we would like each of you to open your booklet and answer the race/ethnicity question that is on page one.
 - Immediately following this focus group, you can also use your scratch pad to record thoughts that you may not have been comfortable with sharing with the group, or thoughts that you wanted to share but were not able to during the discussion. We want to encourage you to share all of the thoughts you had during our session today, and this is a way we can make sure we hear the ideas that you might not have felt comfortable sharing out loud. Please do not write your names on these sheets, so anything you write cannot be connected back to you.
- The topics we will be covering today are sensitive in nature. We understand that discussing these topics may affect each of us in different ways, so we want to make sure the discussion today does not become too troubling for anyone here. Please know you

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are free to leave at any time. At the conclusion of this discussion, in case anyone wishes to reach out for support, everyone will be provided with a handout that includes instructions on how to contact the SHARP office, SAPR office, DoD SAFE Helpline, Military Crisis Line, and MEO office.

- Please note that this focus group discussion is not the appropriate place to make a sexual assault disclosure. There are explicit resources available for the disclosure of sexual assaults, and those resources are provided on the resource sheet handout that each of you will receive at the end of this discussion.
- Does anyone have any questions?
- Before we begin our discussion, please note that in front of each of you is a handout with DoD definitions of sexual harassment, sexual assault, and an explanation of the difference between culture and climate for your reference. Please take a moment to review each of these definitions.

9 CFR 1604.11 definition of sexual harassment: “a Harassment on the basis of sex is a violation of Section 703 of Title VII. Unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, and other verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature constitute sexual harassment when:

- (1) submission to such conduct is made either explicitly or implicitly a term or condition of a individual’s employment.
- (2) submission to or rejection of such conduct by an individual is used as the basis for employment decisions affecting such individual, or
- (3) Such conduct has the purpose or effect of unreasonably interfering with an individual’s work performance or creating an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment.

DoD definition of sexual assault: “Intentional sexual contact characterized by use of force, threats, intimidation, or abuse of authority, or when the victim does not or cannot consent. The term includes a broad category of sexual offenses, including rape, sexual assault, aggravated sexual contact, abusive sexual contact, forcible sodomy (forced oral or anal sex) or attempts to commit these offenses.”

Sexual assault is a crime defined as intentional sexual contact, characterized by use of force, physical threat, or abuse of authority or when the victim does not or cannot consent.

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Aggravated sexual contact (Article 120 UCMJ); engaging in “sexual contact” with another person or causing sexual contact with another person: by force, or by causing grievous bodily harm, by threats or creating fear of death, grievous bodily harm or kidnapping, or rendering another unconscious, or administering a drug or other intoxicant.

Abusive sexual contact (Article 120 UCMJ); causing another person to engage in “sexual contact” by using threats of or creating fear of bodily harm or other harm less than death, grievous bodily harm or kidnapping.

What questions do you have regarding these definitions?

I’d like to begin with some introductions. Let’s go around the room and tell the group your first name only and something that you like to do in your free time. I’ll go first.

NOTE TO REVIEWERS:

The moderator will introduce themselves and briefly describe an activity that they enjoy doing, then ask each of the participants to contribute to this introduction phase one-by-one. This introduction is an important step in building rapport within the group and ensuring that each participant feels comfortable speaking in the group setting.

Section II: Perceptions related to sexual assault, sexual harassment, racial harassment, gender discrimination, and racial discrimination (25–30 min)

Internal Note: Research Question and Grading Activity

RESEARCH QUESTION: What impact does race/ethnicity or gender have on Service members’ unique experiences related to sexual assault, sexual harassment, racial harassment, gender discrimination, and racial discrimination?

The goal of this activity is to generate discussion by allowing participants to assign a grade to their experiences in the military related to sexual harassment and sexual assault and discussing the grade that they chose, including their perceptions of the impact that their gender and membership in a racial/ethnic minority group had on these experiences.

Task: Focus group participants will receive a sheet of paper with the “grades” A through F on it per below. Participants will be asked to circle a grade for their overall experiences in the military related to sexual harassment. This grading task will be followed with the questions below, and then repeated to assess participants’ grades for sexual assault.

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Now, I would like everyone to take a moment and think about your experiences in the military related to sexual harassment. You may or may not have directly experienced it, you may have observed it, or otherwise have awareness of it. How would you grade the military based on your overall experience related to sexual harassment?

A B C D F

Probe: What are some reasons for your “grade?” *[Moderator will follow up on participant responses to determine what constructs impacted their grade, and therefore, their experiences. Specific constructs that will be probed more deeply include, but are not limited to, experiencing SH, training, reporting, and response.]*

Probe: What impact did your identity as [insert racial/ethnic minority group] have on the grade you chose to rate your experiences with sexual harassment?

Probe: What impact do you think your gender had on the grade you assigned?

Probe: What could the military do now to improve that grade? What could the military do in the future to improve that grade?

Probe: What role did organizational leadership have in determining the grade that you assigned?

Probe: What role did your unit’s attitudes related to sexual harassment have in the grade that you assigned?

Do you feel like you’ve ever been a target for sexual harassment in the military because of your identity as [insert gender and racial/ethnic minority group]? If so, how has your identity impacted your experiences with sexual harassment in the military?

Now, I would like everyone to take a moment and think about sexual assault in the military. How would you grade the military related to sexual assault prevention, mitigation, and response?

A B C D F

Probe: What are some reasons for your “grade?”

Probe: What impact did your identity as [insert racial/ethnic minority group] have on the grade you chose?

Probe: What impact do you think your gender had on the grade you assigned?

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Probe: What can be done to allow you to give a better grade to your experiences with sexual assault in the military?

Probe: What role did organizational leadership have in determining the grade you assigned?

Probe: What role did your unit's attitudes related to sexual assault have in your assessment?

What impact would identifying as [insert racial/ethnic minority group] have on a Service member's experiences with sexual assault?

Do you feel like someone might be targeted for sexual assault because of their gender or racial/ethnic identity? **[If yes]** What are some reasons that you feel like someone might be targeted for sexual assault because of their gender or racial/ethnic identity?

Section III: Perceptions of reasons why sexual harassment, sexual assault, racial harassment, gender discrimination, and racial discrimination are persistent (10–15 min)

Internal Note: Research Question

RESEARCH QUESTION: What do racial/ethnic minority Service members feel are the reasons that sexual harassment, sexual assault, racial harassment, and gender and racial discrimination continue to persist in the military?

I'd like to get the group's perspectives on why these adverse events continue to persist in the military. I'll mention an adverse event, and I'd like to hear some reasons that these continue to persist:

- sexual assault
- sexual harassment
- racial harassment
- gender discrimination
- racial discrimination

In general, what are the main causes of sexual harassment and sexual assault?

What has the military done in an attempt to reduce sexual harassment and sexual assault? What has worked?

What has the military done to reduce sexual harassment and sexual assault that has not worked? Why has this not worked?

Section IV: Perceptions of risk of sexual harassment, sexual assault, racial harassment, gender discrimination, and racial discrimination Assault (15–20 min)

Internal Note: Research Question

RESEARCH QUESTION: What are racial/ethnic minority Service members' perceptions of their risk of sexual harassment and sexual assault, and what are the potential impacts of racial harassment, gender discrimination, and racial discrimination on those perceived risks?

How would you describe your level of risk for experiencing sexual harassment? What about sexual assault? How does your identity as a [insert gender and racial/ethnic minority group] affect that risk?

In what circumstances might you be more at risk for experiencing sexual harassment or sexual assault?

Which Service members might be at greater risk of experiencing sexual harassment or sexual assault? What impact does a Service member's race or ethnicity have on their likelihood of experiencing sexual harassment or sexual assault? What impact does a Service member's gender have on these risk levels?

What role does racial harassment play in incidences of sexual assault or sexual harassment?

What role does racial discrimination play in incidences of sexual assault or sexual harassment?

Section V: Recommendations to reduce the incidence rates of sexual harassment, sexual assault, and gender and racial discrimination (10–15 min)

Internal Note: Research Question

RESEARCH QUESTION: What steps need to be taken to reduce the incidence rates of sexual harassment, sexual assault, racial harassment, gender discrimination, and racial discrimination?

What steps need to be taken to make the military safer for Service members of racial and ethnic minority groups?

What needs to be done at the leadership level [e.g., installation/ship/command] to reduce sexual harassment? What needs to be done at lower levels of the command structure (e.g., team, squad, section, flight), to reduce sexual harassment?

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What needs to be done at the leadership level [e.g., installation/ship/command] to reduce sexual assault? What needs to be done at lower levels of the command structure to reduce sexual assault?

What needs to be done to reduce incidents of racial harassment?

What steps need to be taken to reduce the likelihood of a Service member experiencing racial discrimination?

What can be done to reduce gender discrimination?

Section VI: Reporting and Support (10–15 min)

Internal Note: Research Question

RESEARCH QUESTIONS: What are some reasons that racial/ethnic minority Service members may choose to not report incidences of sexual harassment, sexual assault, racial discrimination, racial harassment, or gender discrimination?

What are the barriers to reporting incidences of sexual harassment, sexual assault, racial harassment, gender discrimination, or racial discrimination for racial/ethnic minority Service members?

What would be the best way for the military to provide support for racial/ethnic minority Service members who have experienced sexual harassment, sexual assault, racial harassment, racial discrimination, or gender discrimination?

What are some reasons why members of your ethnic/minority and gender would not report sexual harassment, sexual assault, racial harassment, racial or gender discrimination to military authorities?

Thinking about sexual harassment, sexual assault, gender discrimination, racial harassment, and racial discrimination; which of these incidents would you be most likely to report? What would make you more likely to report that type of incident? Which of these incidents would you be least likely to report? What would make you less likely to report that type of incident?

How would you seek support after an incident of sexual harassment, sexual assault, racial or gender discrimination?

How could the military improve how it supports Service members when they have experienced such an incident?

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Section VII: Closing (2 min)

[TIME PERMITTING] I appreciate your feedback. Before we wrap up, I am going to consult with my colleagues to see if there is anything I missed to ask or if there are any follow-up questions.

[THANK AND CLOSE] Thank you for taking the time to speak with me today and participate in this focus group. As I mentioned at the beginning, we will treat all of your comments anonymously. We will not tie your names or any other identifying information to the specific comments you made today. Please also respect your fellow participants and their anonymity when you leave here today.

Do you have any questions for me or is there anything that you would like to share that you didn't have the chance to share yet?

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Appendix (potential focus group activities)

The additional focus group activities below may be incorporated into data collection for the following reasons: (1) the grading activities in Section II take less time than anticipated; (2) the research team feels that one of the additional activities may elicit more detailed insights with some of the participant segments; (3) feedback from participants on the grading activity reaches saturation during data collection.

Mapping Activity:

The goal of this activity is to identify locations where adverse events are more likely to occur to prompt discussions on what factors cause these locations to be safe/unsafe, whether the unsafe locations are different for each type of adverse event (i.e., SA v. SH), and whether these locations are unique to either gender or racial/ethnic minority Service member group.

Task: Participants will be presented with a map of their installation and surrounding area along with a booklet of different colored stickers, each representing a different type of adverse event. They will be asked to place stickers on specific locations symbolizing adverse events (i.e., SH/SA, gender and racial discrimination).

Probe: Let's begin with the stickers meant to represent incidents of sexual assault. What locations did you place those stickers?

Probe: When you were thinking about where sexual assault may be more likely to occur, who would be most at-risk at those locations? What would make them most at-risk? What role might their race or ethnicity play in their risk level? What about their gender? What other factors might make them more at risk at these locations [e.g., rank, LBGTQIA+, involvement of alcohol]?

Probe: Where do you feel most at-risk? What makes you feel that way?

Probe: How did you identify the locations that are most risky?

Probe: What locations that you identified as risky are unique to your gender? What risky locations are unique to those who are members of a racial or ethnic minority group?

Persona Activity:

The goal of this activity is to allow participants to identify who may be at greater risk of adverse events (i.e., SH/SA, gender and racial discrimination) by presenting the group with personas of Service members from different racial/ethnic/gender groups and asking them to provide rationale behind which personas are at greater risk.

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Task: Participants will be presented with personas of Service members of both genders from racial/ethnic minority groups and a worksheet asking them to rank the personas in order from greatest to least at-risk.

Probe: Thinking about the worksheet that each of you completed, which Service member did you identify as “high risk” of experiencing sexual assault? What makes that Service member most at risk?

Probe: Which Service member did you identify as “low risk” of experiencing sexual assault? What makes that Service member low risk?

Probe: What other factors might make this Service member more at risk [e.g., group setting v. one-on-one, LGBTQIA+, new to an installation or unit, alcohol, etc.]?

Attributes Flip Chart Activity:

The goal of this activity is to have participants “build” an at-risk Service member, one attribute at a time, by writing one attribute per post-it note, then combine similar attributes into a “persona,” and discuss their beliefs about how each attribute contributes to their risk level.

Task: Participants will independently write attributes of someone who may be at greater risk on post-it notes (one attribute per post-it; e.g., junior enlisted, female, Black, new to an installation, etc.) and then build a “persona” by grouping similar post-it notes onto the flip chart. This activity would result in several personas that the group identified as at-risk and would allow them to describe the attributes that make them at-risk.

Probe: What are some of the attributes that each of you wrote down that would make a Service member more at-risk of experiencing sexual assault? [Moderator begins by gathering similar attributes from each participant and grouping them together on a flip chart.]

Probe: As you can see by the attributes that are grouped together, some of you wrote down very similar risk factors. What made you identify these traits as risk factors?

Probe: What other traits, or attributes, would you add to this grouping to increase the risk level? What makes those factors place this persona at a higher risk?