Individual Experiences, Demographics and Organizational Contexts: Sexual Harassment in the Military

Abstract

An extensive literature focuses on the interplay between individual experiences of sexual harassment and larger environmental contexts that may contribute to the likelihood of individualized harassment. However, data constraints have limited the capacity to link individual contexts with organizational environments. This research utilizes a unique dataset that allows independent assessment of organizational climates and the experiences of individuals within those organizations. The Defense Equality Opportunity Climate Survey (DEOCS) implemented a special module to examine issues related to sexual harassment and sexual assault (SHSA) in 2011. An overall survey was implemented from March 17 – 24, 2011, in which 21,304 active duty members of the military completed the basic climate assessment survey; 6,585 voluntarily participated in a special SHSA module and 14,449 did not complete the supplement (2,306 civilians are excluded). In effect, this provides two independent samples. Multi-level analyses are employed, measuring individual experiences in relation to organizational unit level indicators. Results indicate that sexist environmental context at the organizational level (military unity) has an independent influence controlling for individual level variables. Perhaps equally important, organizational variables like organizational climate, work group cohesion and job satisfaction do not have significant influences in predicting individual statements about experiences of sexual harassment in the last 12 months.

Sexual harassment in the workplace has been the focus of much academic research across disciplines as well as much media attention. Research shows that sexual harassment is a widespread phenomenon with negative consequences for both individuals and organizations, some of which are very serious. For example, targets have been found to experience career interruptions, lowered productivity, lessened job satisfaction, lowered self confidence, loss of motivation, physical health ailments, and loss of commitment to work and employer (Crull, 1982; DiTomaso, 1989; Fitzgerald, Hulin, and Drasgow, 1994; Gutek, 1985; Gutek and Koss, 1993, USMSPB, 1981, 1987, 1995). For the organization, legal damages are minor compared with costs of reduced productivity, turnover, absenteeism, employee transfers, loss of company loyalty, low levels of job satisfaction, and health costs (Dansky & Kilpatrick, 1997; Faley, 1991; Niebhur, 1997).

The original definition of sexual harassment was "deliberate or repeated unsolicited verbal comments, gestures, or physical contact of a sexual nature which are unwelcome" (USMSPB, 1981). The initial definition was expanded to include any conduct of a sexual nature which created "an intimidating, hostile, or offensive working environment" (USMSPB, 1988; 1995). Even the expanded definition is criticized for being so broad, however, that empirical and theoretical inconsistencies arising from specific studies remain (Schneider, 1982).

For instance, definitions are disparate and often discipline-specific, which further confounds clear conceptualizations (Terpstra and Baker, 1986). Recognizing that considerable overlap exists, most researchers use the definitions specific to their discipline. Sociologists focus on environmental variables at both the societal and organizational levels (e.g., power/status differences); psychologists focus on individual variables (e.g., sexist attitudes); economists look at labor market issues (e.g., who benefits?); while organizational/business studies use work structures (e.g., formal/informal hierarchies). As a result, the body of literature available on the topic is disparate and often useful only within a specific discipline.

Because the defining criteria for identifying sexual harassment have been “uninvited and unwanted,” other complicating factors lie in the perceptions and evaluations of being “unwanted.” Definitions of “acceptable” versus “unwanted” are likely to differ vastly between the perpetrators and the targets (Baker, Terpstra and Cutler, 1990; Fitzgerald and Ormerod, 1991; Loredo, Reid and Deaux, 1995; Saal, 1996; Sev’er and Ungar, 1997).

Perhaps most problematic is that virtually any behavior, including requests for dates, pressure for sexual activities, comments, jokes, and attempted and forcible rape can constitute sexual harassment. Many argue that individual definitions of these behaviors as sexual harassment could vary systematically depending on individual characteristics as well as the

specific contexts in which the behavior occurred. In other words, some argue that sexual harassment appears highly subjective, and the experiences of women and men are variable and open to alternative explanations (Gorden, 1981).

The fact remains that the definition of sexual harassment includes such a wide spectrum of behaviors, including legally defined harassment, sexist behaviors, and sexual assault, and that these behaviors may overlap in real life situations. Thus there is still a lack of conceptual distinction among them as well as a paucity of research attempting to sort through the various conceptualizations. This research focuses on creating conceptual distinctions among sexual harassment, sexist behaviors and sexual assault and creating a first attempt at delineating the empirical relationships among them.

Definitions of Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment in the workplace can be divided into two forms, both of which are defined legally. The *quid pro quo* type is the easiest to identify, and although frequencies are low, it is the most likely to be challenged. This form includes the exchange of work-related benefits or consequences for sexual favors through bribes, threats or even physical force (see Firestone and Harris, 1994).

The second form, environmental harassment, includes unwanted sexualized actions to alter, interfere with or affect one's work performance by creating a hostile and offensive work climate (Firestone and Harris, 1994; Sev'er, 1999). The definition of this second type of harassment is considered more blurred. One problem has been how to ascertain whether an act is "unwanted;" another has been deciding on whom the burden of proof should fall that the action was against the individual's will. Expectations of economic losses and/or psychological pain due to the harassment have also been an issue. Some courts demand that targets have proof of both

before claims of environmental harassment can be made. Two Supreme Court rulings may help put to rest the belief that assessments of environmental harassment are subjective. First, the "reasonable" woman standard grants any woman classified as reasonable to assess whether she is being subject to harassment or to acceptable behaviors (e.g., teasing, fun jokes, etc., Greenhouse, 1993; Wells and Kracher, 1993). Second, the ruling that "psychological stress" does not have to be documented by medical professionals establishes precedent for allowing women to interpret their own experiences within the boundaries of the organization (Wells and Kracher, 1993).

As noted by Ormerod, et al. (2005) in their conclusion:

> Empirical research to date suggests that reducing sexual harassment and other unprofessional, gender-related behavior, recruiting and promoting women into positions of leadership, creating gender-balanced work environments, and creating an *organizational climate where complaints of sexual harassment and assault are taken seriously, responded to swiftly, and where such behavior is sanctioned, can help to reduce the occurrence of sexual assault*. [emphasis added]

Importantly for this analysis, sexual harassment was defined in the "2004 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Reserve Component Members (WGRR)" in three different categories. The first, "crude/offensive behavior" included verbal and/or nonverbal behaviors of a sexual nature that were offensive or embarrassing such as whistling, staring, leering, and/or ogling (Lipari, Lancaster and Jones: 39).

Sexism

Sometimes labeled gender harassment, sexism includes generalized sexual or sexist comments or behaviors that insult, degrade or embarrass women. Sexist attitudes are typically based on stereotypical views of gender appropriate behavior (De Judicibus and McCabe, 2001). As conceptualized by Bem (1974), typical masculine traits include rationality, risk taking, and aggression. Feminine traits include nurturance, emotional expressiveness, and self-subordination. These attitudes result in the stereotypical beliefs that women are inferior to men

(particularly in the paid workplace), and that men have the prerogative to initiate sexual behavior of any kind and to use pressure to achieve it when necessary (Bartling and Eisenman, 1993; Walker, Rowe, and Quinsey, 1993. Thus, an environment can be sexist, although the behaviors creating that that situation may not constitute the legal definition of sexual harassment.

Sexism relates to both sexual harassment and sexual assault because people with sexist attitudes are unlikely to believe a target who says the behavior was unwanted, and may blame the target for having in some way encouraged the perpetrator (Valentine-French and Radtke, 1993). Importantly, people are likely to take stronger actions when they are certain that the situation will be perceived as sexual harassment by others (Fitzgerald, Swan and Fischer, 1995).

In the "2004 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Reserve Component Members (WGRR)" sexist behaviors were defined as verbal and/or nonverbal behaviors that convey insulting, offensive, or condescending attitudes based on the gender of the member (Lipari, Lancaster and Jones, 2005: 39).

Sexual Assault

The definition of sexual assault and rape has evolved from one designed to control "competing male interests in controlling sexual access to females, rather than protecting women's interests in controlling their own bodies and sexuality" (Greenberg, Minow and Roberts, 2004: 776; Hasday, 2000) to a code focused on the use of force and lack of consent (Lyon, 2004). The term sexual assault has been used to describe a large range of nonconsensual sexual behaviors from kissing and/or touching to coerced penetration by physical force or threat of force. While most people have a "script" about rape which plays in their mind, proving a case legally is typically not as clear cut. For example, how do you show someone was forced against his/her will. To coerce someone into having sex requires intent on the part of the perpetrator ---

accidentally doing something which causes another to have sex with you is not rape, regardless of the willingness of the victim (Conly, 2004). Furthermore, if a victim is considered incapable of giving consent (due to age, mental/physical status, intoxication, etc.) the act may also be considered rape or sexual assault. To confuse matters even more, attempted rape is often considered the equivalent of actual rape. Furthermore, sometimes rape is considered as an extreme form of sexual harassment. Whether rape is subsumed under sexual harassment, or sexual harassment is considered a form of rape, conceptual distinctions between the two become clouded and provide some with the evidence to contend that sexually wrong behaviors are in the eye of the beholder.

The Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) defines sexual assault as:

> …a crime…; intentional sexual contact, characterized by use of force, physical threat or abuse of authority or when the victim does not or cannot consent. Sexual assault includes rape, nonconsensual sodomy (oral or anal sex), indecent assault (unwanted, inappropriate sexual contact or fondling), or attempt to commit these acts. … "Consent" shall not be deemed or construed to mean the failure by the victim to offer physical resistance (DoD, 2004).

Military crime statistics for 2005 indicated that 2,374 total sexual assaults were reported by or against service members (DoD, 2005). However, past research suggests that few individuals (the range of reported incidences is from 15% - 25%) report sexual assault to authorities (Clay-Warner and Burt, 2005; Harned, et al., 2002). Past research also indicated that the risk of workplace assault may be higher for women in male-dominated occupations (Dekker and Barling, 1998; Frank, Brogan and Schiffman, 1998; Haavio-Mannila, Kauppinen-Toropainen and Kandolin, 1998; Sadler, et al., 2003).

Clearly the researcher's understanding and conceptualization of rape and other forms of sexual assault affect how they are measured and determine which behaviors are included or excluded as part of that definition. As Conly (2004: 121) notes:

> To subsume all areas of sexual wrong under the heading of rape does a disservice to all concerned. It hurts those whose laudable goal is just to show that sex can be dark and hurtful…It is bad for those who are aggressors in any sexual situation, who may feel that, as long as they have not committed rape, their actions are morally neutral…This may be a case where analytical philosophy, with its conceptual distinction and semantic precision can indeed explain something to our sense of order… [emphasis added].

For the following analyses, sexual assault was defined as attempted and/or actual sexual relations without the members consent and against his or her will (Lipari, Lancaster and Jones, 2005: 39; Lipari, Shaw and Rock, 2005). This definition is consistent with the DoD's definition of sexual assault (DoD, 2004).

Methods

Responses were analyzed results from 21,304 participants in Defense Equal Opportunity Climate Surveys (DEOCS), implemented from June 23 through June 27, 2011.

Survey

The survey instrument was designed to enable serving military personnel to respond to a number of questions about topics related to equal opportunity and organizational effectiveness The questions were developed at the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute (DEOMI), which specializes in the measurement of equal opportunity climate scales. At the unit level, climate surveys typically are implemented once a year, initiated by the commanding officer. All unit members are invited to participate voluntarily and their results are confidential. No information is provided to the commander that would allow the identification of individual respondents. See Walsh, Matthews, Tuller, Parks and McDonald (2010) for a more extensive discussion of the surveys.

Response rates of 50% to 60% in typical DEOCS implementations are interesting in two ways. First, these response rates are at or above those typically found in organizational research

(Baruch & Holtom, 2008). However, given that the surveys are initiated by the unit commanding officer, one would expect a high response. The fact that the response rates are consistent with general outcomes suggests that credibility is given to the statement that participation is voluntary and confidential. Additionally, recent research at DEOMI indicates that respondent demographics closely resemble those of the units involved in the survey at a particular point in time. This gives credibility to the idea that these are "representative" surveys, with one major qualification. Within any given time period, there is no random selection process for the units that will be included in the data collected, largely because they are initiated by the commanding officers. Furthermore, historically Army and Navy units have more actively employed the DEOCS, producing over-representation of respondents from those service branches. This historical pattern will change because new guidelines now require all Department of Defense (DoD) units to participate on an annual basis. Nevertheless, the analysis of any particular accumulation of responses should observe the distribution of the participating units. If sufficient numbers of respondents are identified by branch or other characteristics, it is possible to weight the data to reflect the DoD-wide reference population. Weights developed by branch, rank, race, sex and/or other variables deemed central to the research focus will assure proportional representation for general conclusions drawn from the sample.

Sampling and Measurement Concerns

In order to help assess the validity, reliability and generalizability of the test questions related to sexual harassment and sexual assault, first the demographics of those completing those questions are compared to those from earlier samples completing only the core DEOCS questions. If the recent test sample is distinct, it could mean that there are measurement

concerns, with a select group of individuals choosing to answer the additional questions compared to the "typical" samples of those answering the standard DEOCS items.

It is possible that the respondents to the SHSA questions are more likely members of a particular service branch (e.g., Army) or race, for example, but their response patterns match those typically responding to the DEOCS. If the profiles do not match those responding to the DEOCS, then weighting the data could solve the problem of representing the larger set of DEOCS respondents. Even if this is the case it is important to consider more general reliability and validity problems based on response patterns.

Validity

In science and statistics, *validity* has no single established definition but generally refers to the extent to which a concept, conclusion or empirical measurement is sound and justifiable, corresponding correctly to the real (valid) world. Most researchers in general accept that the concept of scientific validity addresses the nature of reality and as such is an epistemological and philosophical issue as well as one related to measurement. Tests of validity tend to focus on the specifics of measurement, since questions related to theories about knowledge or the general existence of "empirical facts" are virtually impossible to investigate. While the fields of science and research often use a variety of forms of validity (e.g., face, criterion, predictive, experimental), the initial focus of this report is concerned with external validity and whether any "sample mortality" occurred between completing the DEOCS and the follow-up questions, making responses non-comparable to what one would expect from everyone completing both the DEOCS and the follow-up questions. Such sampling concerns could have substantial effects on the internal validity of the SHSA scales.

Cronbach's Alpha

Reliability of scales is most typically measured using Cronbach's Alpha. Cronbach's Alpha (a.k.a., "the reliability coefficient"), produced in a 1951 article by Leo Cronbach based on work in the 1940s by Guttman and others (see also Revelle, 1979), is the most common estimate of internal consistency of items in a scale. Alpha measures the extent to which item responses obtained at the same time correlate highly with each other. Though widely interpreted as such, strictly speaking alpha is not a measure of unidimensionality. Rather, alpha is a measure of level of mean intercorrelation weighted by variances (in contrast to standardized item alpha, which equalizes variances), or a measure of mean intercorrelation for standardized data, corrected for number of items in the measure. Thus, a set of items can have a high alpha and still be multidimensional. This happens when there are separate clusters of items (separate dimensions) which intercorrelate highly, even though the items in the different clusters themselves do not. Also, a set of items can have a low alpha even when unidimensional if there is high random error.

In spite of the problems noted, it is valuable to calculate and report Cronbach's alpha coefficient to establish the internal consistency of items included in any scales or subscales one may use. Individual items are notoriously unreliable (Nunnally & Bernstein, 1994; McIver and Carmines 1981; Spector 1992). For example, Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) stated, "Measurement error averages out when individual scores are summed to obtain a total score" (p. 67). An individual item cannot discriminate among fine degrees of an attribute. For example, with a dichotomously scored item one can only distinguish between two levels of the attribute, i.e. they lack precision. Finally, individual items lack scope. McIver and Carmines (1981) say, "It is very unlikely that a single item can fully represent a complex theoretical concept or any specific attribute for that matter" (p. 15). In most cases, the analysis of the data then would use

the summated scales or subscales and not the individual items. If one does otherwise, the reliability of the items is at best probably low and at worst unknown. Cronbach's alpha cannot provide reliability estimates for single items (see Blalock, 1970), since each item is perfectly correlated with itself.

The set of SHSA questions is being Beta tested to decide whether they should replace the sexual harassment scale items currently being used as part of the DEOCS. This in itself could compromise the decision by individuals as to whether they would complete the follow-up surveys. It could be the case that the respondents felt they had "already" answered those [or those types of] questions.

Results

Results indicate that sexist environmental context at the organizational level (military unity) has an independent influence controlling for individual level variables. Perhaps equally important, organizational variables like organizational climate, work group cohesion and job satisfaction do not have significant influences in predicting individual statements about experiences of sexual harassment in the last 12 months.

Discussion and Conclusion

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Table 1

Logistic and Hierarchical Logist Models Predicting the Probability of Individual Reports of Sexual Harassment

	Logistic			Hierarchical Logistic - 1			Hierarchical Logistic - 2		
	Estimate	Pr(>|z|)		Estimate	Pr(>|z|)		Estimate	Pr(>|z|)	
INDIVIDUAL LEVEL VARIABLES									
(Intercept)	-1.10	0.00	***	-1.07	0.00	***	-2.22	0.01	**
Female	-0.99	0.00	***	-0.98	0.00	***	-0.97	0.00	***
Black	0.07	0.37		0.09	0.28		0.11	0.20	
Hispanic	-0.24	0.00	**	-0.22	0.01	**	-0.20	0.02	*
Sexist Environment	1.12	0.00	***	1.13	0.00	***	1.10	0.00	***
Organizational Commitment	0.12	0.00	***	0.13	0.00	***	0.13	0.00	**
Work Group Cohesion	0.10	0.00	**	0.10	0.00	**	0.09	0.00	**
Enlisted	-0.42	0.00	***	-0.42	0.00	***	-0.40	0.00	**
UNIT LEVEL VARIABLES									
Proportion Female							-0.14	0.63	
Proportion Black							-0.30	0.36	
Proportion Hispanic							-0.51	0.19	
Sexist Environment							0.51	0.00	***
Organizational Commitment							-0.21	0.15	
Work Group Cohesion							0.06	0.70	
Proportion Officers							-0.16	0.60	
AIC	7709.00			7691.00			7634.00		

Notes: The dependent variable is coded 0 for "Yes, Experienced Sexual Harassment" and 1 for "No." Higher scores on the three scales indicate more "favorable" contexts (less sexist, higher organizational commitment and higher work group cohesion). The variable names identify code 1 for the dummy variables. * p < .05. ** p < .01. *** p < .001.

Table 2

Logistic and Hierarchical Logist Models Predicting the Probability of Individual Reports of Sexual Harassment, Unweighted and Weighted Results

	Logistic											
	Unweighted			Weighted			Unweighted			Weighted		
	B	Sig.		B	Sig.		B	Sig.		B	Sig.	
INDIVIDUAL LEVEL VARIABLES												
(Intercept)	-1.10	0.00	***	-1.94	0.00	***	-2.22	0.01	**	-3.09	0.00	**
Female	-0.99	0.00	***	-0.97	0.00	***	-0.97	0.00	***	-0.96	0.00	***
Black	0.07	0.37		0.07	0.41		0.11	0.20		0.10	0.25	
Hispanic	-0.24	0.00	**	-0.24	0.00	**	-0.20	0.02	*	-0.20	0.02	*
Sexist Environment	1.12	0.00	***	1.12	0.00	***	1.10	0.00	***	1.09	0.00	***
Organizational Commitment	0.12	0.00	***	0.13	0.00	***	0.13	0.00	**	0.13	0.00	**
Work Group Cohesion	0.10	0.00	**	0.10	0.00	**	0.09	0.00	**	0.09	0.01	**
Enlisted	-0.42	0.00	***	-0.47	0.00	***	-0.40	0.00	**	-0.44	0.00	**
UNIT LEVEL VARIABLES												
Proportion Female							-0.14	0.63		-0.17	0.51	
Proportion Black							-0.30	0.36		-0.30	0.29	
Proportion Hispanic							-0.51	0.19		-0.53	0.13	
Sexist Environment							-0.51	0.00	***	-0.54	0.00	***
Organizational Commitment							-0.21	0.15		-0.19	0.14	
Work Group Cohesion							0.06	0.70		0.03	0.84	
Proportion Officers							-0.16	0.60		-0.13	0.65	

Notes: The dependent variable is coded 0 for "Yes, Experienced Sexual Harassment" and 1 for "No." Higher scores on the three scales indicate more "favorable" contexts (less sexist, higher organizational commitment and higher work group cohesion). The variable names identify code 1 for the dummy variables. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

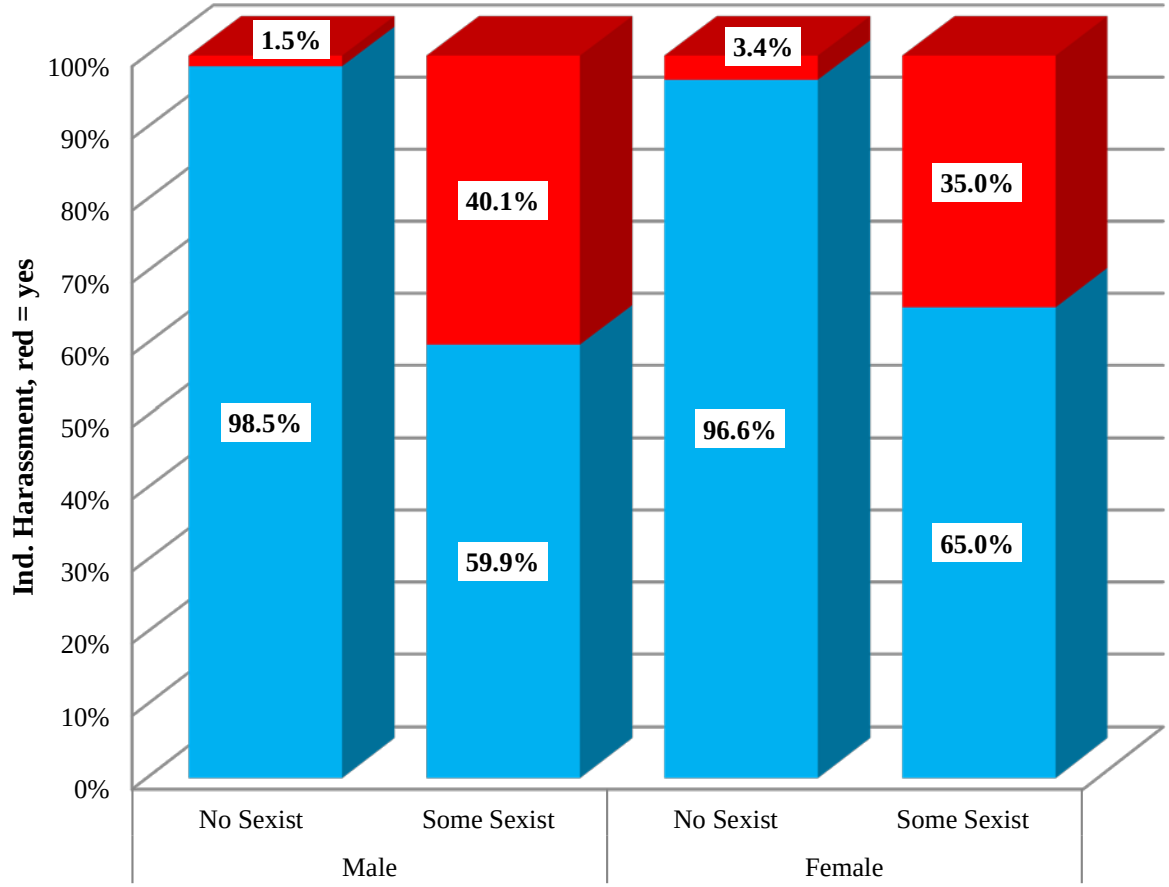

Figure 1. **Reports of Individual Sexual Harassment Behaviors by Reports of Sexist Behaviors, DEOCS, 3/17 - 3/25, 2011**

Appendix: DEOCS

General Description

1. What is a DEOCS?

The Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute (DEOMI) Organizational Climate Survey (DEOCS) is a confidential, command-requested organization development survey focusing on issues of equal opportunity and organizational effectiveness.

2. Who administers the DEOCS?

The DEOCS program is managed and administered by the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute (DEOMI).

3. What does the DEOCS Survey look like?

The core survey contains 63 items, but military personnel will need to complete only 56 items. Approximately half the items address EO/EEO issues, the remainder address organizational and demographic areas. In all, the DEOCS measures 14 climate factors: eight EO/EEO and six OE factors. These are all measured on a five-point scale. A sample of the survey is available for download from this site. Commanders can also elect to add up to ten (10) locally developed questions (LDQs)…

5. Will the Commander receive a report? If so, what will the report look like?

You will be able to request the report one day after the survey stop date. Sign into your SAAS account and click on “request/download report”. It will take 24hrs for the report to be generated. Sign back into your SAAS account click on “add/download report” and then on “download now”. Print and save the report. Also, you must provide the CDR with a copy as we do not forward the report to the CDR. A Sample of the DEOCS report is available for review at this site.

6. Who can request a DEOCS?

The survey is available to Department of Defense agencies. The survey is administered by request of a unit commander, and feedback concerning results is provided to the requesting commander. Commanders can authorize a responsible member, preferably an equal opportunity advisor (EOA, CMEO, EOR, MEO, etc), within their unit to make the request on their behalf. This authorization is handled through the "Commander Consent Verification" process that is completed when making a request for DEOCS.

Retrieved July 14, 2011 from http://www.deocs.net/DocDownloads/DEOCS_Description.pdf