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**THESIS**

**PERCEPTIONS, EXPERIENCES, AND CHALLENGES  
BY U.S. NAVAL OFFICERS FROM MAJORITY AND  
UNDERREPRESENTED GROUPS WHEN RESPONDING  
TO CRITICAL EVENTS FROM MARCH  
2020 THROUGH MARCH 2021**

by

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September 2023

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RESPONDING TO CRITICAL EVENTS FROM MARCH 2020 THROUGH  
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## ABSTRACT

Over 2020 and 2021, the United States experienced three events that contributed to political controversy and social unrest: the COVID-19 pandemic, Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, and the January 6 attack on the capitol. The U.S. Navy was not isolated from the effects of these events and needed to prepare its leaders to engage in difficult conversations to ensure the workforce remained physically and mentally ready in the face of similar-magnitude events. The purpose of this qualitative study is to analyze the perceptions by the majority and underrepresented groups of their superiors' handling of difficult conversations of the three critical events: the COVID-19 pandemic, BLM protests, and the January 6 attack on the capitol, during the period of March 2020 through March 2021. This study uses a semi-structured interviewing approach utilizing a comparative, hybrid case analysis. This case analysis focuses on U.S. Navy communication about challenging external events from approximately March 2020 through March 2021. The authors recommend continuous training on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI), naval culture, leadership, communication, naval guidance, and boundaries to enhance the readiness level of superiors handling difficult conversations.

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## LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ARP	Acquisition Research Program
BLM	Black Lives Matter
CDC	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
CNO	Chief of Naval Operations
CO	Commanding Officer
CoC	Chain of Command
CVN	Nuclear powered aircraft carrier
COVID-19	Corona Virus Disease 2019
DEI	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
DLA	Defense Logistics Agency
DOD	Department of Defense
NPS	Naval Postgraduate School
OIC	Officer in Charge
XO	Executive Officer

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# I. INTRODUCTION

Over 2020 and 2021, the United States experienced three events that contributed to political controversy and social unrest: the COVID-19 pandemic, Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, and the January 6 attack on the capitol. The U.S. Navy was not isolated from the effects of these events and directed its leaders to engage sailors in necessary conversations to ensure the workforce remained physically and mentally ready in the face of these and future controversial events.

This study analyzes the U.S. Naval Officers' perceptions and experiences of the conversations that followed the critical events that occurred from March 2020 through March 2021 and describes the challenges the events posed and officers' experiences engaging in these conversations. The study compares the perceptions and experiences of majority and underrepresented groups. The U.S. Navy recognizes that its leaders must be prepared to engage in sensitive conversations about external events that influence the internal climate. This study provides a deeper understanding of past experiences to guide future performance improvements.

## A. PROBLEM STATEMENT

From March 2020 through March 2021, our nation faced three significant events: COVID-19, BLM protests, and the January 6 event. Following these events, the U.S. Navy directed leaders to engage in necessary conversations with their Sailors to explain the current state and to provide guidance on performance and behavior to continue to meet mission requirements. U.S. Naval Officers received guidance from their superiors and were tasked with ensuring that these protocols were communicated to every sailor. Anecdotal responses and feedback suggested that at least some leaders found these sensitive conversations difficult and that some felt unprepared for these conversations (Aten and Salem, 2020).

The events of 2020 and 2021 demonstrate the criticality of identifying external events that negatively impact Sailors and understanding how to engage in productive

conversations about sensitive topics. Civilian and military leaders recognize that the events of 2020 and 2021 were both a reflection of division in the U.S. because Sailors are not isolated from external events and the division, they reflect. Navy leaders must be equipped to respond promptly and appropriately to such events to maintain safety and readiness.

## **B. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

This qualitative study analyzes the experiences and perceptions of majority and underrepresented groups of their superiors' handling of conversations about the three critical events: the COVID-19 pandemic, BLM protests, and the January 6 attack on the capitol during the period of March 2020 through March 2021. This study answers the following research question: How did U.S. Naval Officers from the majority and underrepresented groups perceive and experience official conversations about the critical events that occurred from March 2020 through March 2021? The study identifies and presents four key takeaways that characterize sailors' experiences, perceptions, and challenges and recommends improving the Navy's response to external social events. The findings of this study benefit the U.S. Navy by providing a greater understanding of sailors' experiences and making recommendations to improve the Navy's communication response to future divisive, external social events.

## **C. SCOPE**

The scope of this qualitative analysis is limited to the majority and underrepresented U.S. Naval officers' perceptions of conversations about the COVID-19, BLM, and January 6 events. This study also includes the participant's experiences while engaging in sensitive or difficult conversations and their perceptions of how the conversations and challenges changed over time.

## **D. RESEARCH DESIGN**

This research thematically analyzed semi-structured interviews of Navy officers about three critical case events. First, the researchers explored multiple related studies on organizational behavior, talent management, diversity equity and inclusion challenges,

outcomes, and training, and difficult conversations. The literature review guided the development of interview questions. Next, the researchers conducted semi-structured interviews asking participants to share perceptions of the three critical events and give examples detailing their experiences. The researchers analyzed the transcripts to identify key takeaways and then compared the key takeaways across the events and relevant groups.

This research approach poses some limitations. One strength of this qualitative approach is that individual, semi-structured interviews allow researchers to understand participants' experiences. However, this limits the number of participants, and inclusion in the study is purposeful rather than random. Thus, the results should not be considered a general representation of the entire population of sailors. Instead, the results provide guidance for future actions, the outcomes of which will require further assessment. Additionally, we limited interviews to Naval officers and did not include enlisted leaders (E6 through E9).

## **E. ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY**

This research consists of five chapters:

- The Introductory chapter (Chapter I) presents the problem statement, purpose and scope of the study, a brief methodology, and organization.
- The Background and Literature review chapter (Chapter II) explains the practical and military context of the problem to the readers.
- The Research Design and Methods chapter (Chapter III) describes the research design, the data collection and sources, the data analysis approach and the strengths and limitations of the study.
- The Data Analysis and Discussion (Chapter IV), which explains the results of the analysis and discusses the findings in two key sections.
- The Conclusions and Recommendations (Chapter V), which contains proposed recommendations on how to potentially resolve the issues

presented in this study and areas of further research if future researchers would like to examine the topic of this study further.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

From March 2020 through March 2021, the United States faced unprecedented social events. These events exacerbated sociopolitical controversy and unrest across the nation to levels not seen in generations. The COVID-19 pandemic, Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, and a presidential election that culminated with the January 6<sup>th</sup> attack on the U.S. Capitol impacted organizations, and workforces in unexpected ways. The events gave rise to conflict in organizations and difficult conversations about sensitive topics and demonstrated the need for organizational leaders to have communication skills to engage in these conversations.

### A. CONFLICT IN ORGANIZATION

Organizational conflict alludes to confusion or dispute resulting from perceived or actual hostility toward coworkers' interests, values, or needs (Mohamed, 2017). Shonk, K. (2022) categorized this type of discord as value conflict, which “arises from fundamental differences in identities and values, including differences in politics, religion, ethics, norms, and other deeply held beliefs.” The COVID-19 pandemic caused a surge of workplace conflicts (Lesser, 2021); the BLM movement resulted in co-worker animosity over political and social ideological expressions of support (LLP, 2020); while U.S. presidential election and the January 6 related anxiety risked workplace cohesion and productivity (Jacobson, 2021).

As Saladino et al.'s (2020) article expounded, the COVID-19 pandemic has subjected humanity to a constant stress level, causing psychological and social repercussions such as “post-traumatic stress disorders, anxiety, depression, and other symptoms of distress.” The high rate of “infections and deaths, economic difficulties, uncertainty about the future, as well as the approaches needed to contain its spread” has had unintended consequences (Osofsky et al., 2020). For example, Covid-19 security and social distance requirements have influenced interpersonal relationships and individuals’

discernment of empathy towards each other (Saladino et al., 2020). These effects were felt in organizations like the Navy and social settings.

As the New York Times (2022) article, “How George Floyd Died, and What Happened Next,” narrated, George Floyd’s murder on May 25, 2020, drew universal indignation after the video of Officer Derek Chauvin putting his knee on Mr. Floyd’s neck went viral. George Floyd's death in Minneapolis prompted the biggest racial justice protests in the United States since the Civil Rights Movement (Silverstein, 2021), bringing about “an awakening, long overdue, which reverberated throughout society” (Applewhite, 2021).

Hundreds of thousands protested across the nation, demanding law enforcement rectification while grieving the death “of yet another unarmed Black person at the hands of police in the United States” (Deliso, 2021). As Mendes discussed in her 2021 article, BLM activists leveraged Floyd's death as a global iconic event, symbolizing the intolerance and injustice they faced at home. The galvanized BLM movement that ensued reached far beyond U.S. borders, inspiring international outrage against racism (Mendes, 2021).

Recently, these called for social justice and reform have moved from the margins of workplaces to center stage in many organizations (Collins et al., 2012). Advancing social justice in the workplace depends on the willingness of leaders to atone for and rectify poor decisions. However, when leaders enact these changes, it may lead to conflicts in the workplace. Because of these reasons, leaders should be unapologetic and supportive towards those who may fear retaliation for speaking out because organizational change will not occur without the honest commitment of its leadership (Hoy & Tarter, 2004, p. 252).

President Donald Trump repeatedly questioned the results of the 2020 U.S. presidential election, feeding a misinformation campaign that culminated with a vicious overrun of the U.S. Capitol in the middle of a Congressional certification of the Electoral College (Witynski, 2021). As Morgan (2022, p.1) asserted in her article, the January 6 insurrection is the most egregious “Assault on American democracy since the Civil War, and it came much closer to disrupting the peaceful transfer of power (and possibly our democracy itself) than we realized at the time,” escalated social discord by worsening divisions and with it the propensity for violence.

In a workplace environment, these behavior-altering principles of conflicting political ideologies can usher unwanted consequences (Johnson & Roberto, 2018). For example, disagreements between workers create tension and disruptions that adversely affect productivity (Thurman, 2016). Moreover, political disparity has attained a level greater than that reported for either race or gender. The political discourse can catalyze organizational conflict, triggering worker alienation, morale problems, and deeper stress levels for employees (Gloeckner, n.d.).

Military leaders had struggled to manage these crucial conversations about the events that occurred from March 2020 through March 2021. This struggle was most noted when a Navy fired, former commanding officer of USS Theodore Roosevelt (CVN-71), Capt. Brett Crozier, made public an onboard outbreak of coronavirus in March 2020 (Seligman & O'Brien, 2020). Likewise, as Houston (2021) described the US Navy's extremism training stated it was acceptable for sailors to advocate for BLM, but not okay for sailors to discuss politically partisan issues—message inconsistency challenges such as this increased the difficulty of already sensitive and difficult discussions.

## **B. CRUCIAL CONVERSATIONS ABOUT SENSITIVE TOPICS**

In the groundbreaking book *Crucial Conversations*, the authors contended that a substantial number of issues result from how people act when they disagree on high-stakes, emotional issues (Patterson et al., 2012). These sensitive and crucial discussions are usually avoided, ineptly conducted, or circumvented entirely (Bradley & Cambell, 2016). To foster desirable outcomes, advance a positive work culture, and nurture highly functional teams, these conversations demand a unique skill set and a carefully crafted approach (Welch & Parker, 2020). Crucial conversations are often about sensitive topics and can be difficult.

Difficult discussions are planned conversations about tough issues or events that focus on sharing diverse viewpoints, increasing common awareness, and building respect—not to convince or win (*Difficult Conversations*, n.d.). These conversations are stressful by nature and, if not conducted well, can quickly turn destructive. Some people can behave at their worst, screaming and sniping sarcastically at each other; while others may

become silent and shut down, resulting in resentment and a lack of progress (Patterson et al., 2012).

As Brainard (2021) explains, “In the context of increased diversity, polarized politics, and degraded public discourse,” difficult conversations are more important than ever—because, if handled correctly, they can appreciably improve organizational productivity and cultural cohesiveness (Patterson et al., 2012). Therefore, it is in every organization’s best interest to identify and implement manageable ways to make these discussions more effective and productive (Bradley & Cambell, 2016). As organizations endeavor to advance equity, diversity, and inclusion (DEI), leadership must recognize that crucial conversations, or the lack of them, matter—these conversations have the power to draw groups together or drive them apart (Akbar, 2022).

As Patterson et al. (2012) delineated, difficult discussions involve high stakes, differing opinions, and intense emotions that customarily occur during regular exchanges versus scheduled gatherings. These conversations can have a considerable workplace impact, especially if people disclose distressing experiences or own up to mistakes, they have made (Burtka, 2021).

Moreover, people regularly avoid engaging in these types of conversations because of their fear of making things worse, and even when they do engage, they often handle these conversations poorly (Patterson et al., 2012). Habitually, people behave at their worst during critical times. As Braddock and Hudspeth (2019, p.101) discussed, "the social justice conversation gone wrong" is a natural and discernable problem that destroys the capacity for all parties involved to broaden each other’s perspective.

People are frequently surprised by crucial discussions, and surprise can bring about higher levels of stress and adrenaline that hinder the ability to effectively navigate these conversations (Patterson et al., 2012). Even though many organizations encourage or even demand discussions about controversial topics, the requisite preparation and support are not always provided to employees (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). People’s general lack of knowledge prevents them from knowing where to start regarding crucial conversations, so they may jump in unprepared.

Individuals' actions are counterproductive; people commonly "act in ways that keep us from getting what we want to our detriment" (Patterson et al., 2012, p.17). However, these missteps can be avoided as the skills required to steer these conversations advantageously are entirely teachable. As *Crucial Conversations* (2012) concluded, organizations should prioritize crucial discussion education and training to better their workforce's careers, health, and personal relationships.

In summary, three principles make up difficult discussions: different opinions, the high stakes involved, and a heightened level of emotions surrounding the conversation. Organizational relationships largely depend on how crucial conversations are managed. If adequately conducted, these conversations can result in breakthroughs, but when poorly handled, they often lead to breakdowns. Many leaders lack the skills to conduct these conversations effectively.

### **C. COMMUNICATION SKILLS**

In today's complicated and rapidly evolving organizational environment, productive communication skills are crucial—and the demand for them can be onerous (Sharp Emerson, 2021). Effective communication skills are vital as they aid in the comprehension of information both for receivers and senders—more precisely and swiftly; in contrast, substandard communication skills can lead to misunderstandings and frustration (Communication Skills, 2022). For these reasons, communication skills are imperative for those engaged in crucial conversations in organizations.

Supervisors should openly discuss concerns and problems with their employees to foster a more inclusive workplace (Torres & Stavros, 2021). For crucial conversations to be worthwhile, they must occur in a safe environment that facilitates participant's contribution toward a set of common goals (Patterson et al., 2012). However, numerous discussions go awry because of participants' aggressive tendencies, their propensity to hold back, or actions that undermine and tear down consent.

In the *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* article, Weinstein & Legate (2022) *stressed the motivational value of listening during intimate and difficult*

*conversations*. The aftereffect of difficult discussions, regardless of the category, depends on participants' listening skills and message content. To have a constructive conversation, facilitators need to support, heed, and acknowledge others' views—crucial conversations should be approached with open-mindedness and restraint (Patterson et al., 2012).

First and foremost, the key to difficult conversations is to stay focused on desired results (the bigger picture), which will help prevent distractions caused by participants' interpersonal games, including infighting. Individuals must refuse to limit themselves to an either/or decision by searching for and establishing a shared agreement based on mutual understanding (Patterson et al., 2012). Facilitators must break through the discussion's noise to determine the root cause of the issue to achieve progress.

Equally important is creating a safe and supportive environment because it would be difficult to advance a beneficial dialogue if people feel unsafe—they will start behaving unfavorably, derailing participant contribution (Patterson et al., 2012). Research supported this concept and focused on successfully managing complicated issues regarding welfare and safety (Leah Shafer, 2017).

Patterson (2012) argued that to sustain and nourish safety during difficult discussions, leaders must keep watch on how people respond to what is being discussed and recognize crucial turning points in a conversation and anticipate when conversation strays from the desired path. Organizations need to foresee and preemptively intervene to stop safety problems, such as signs of withdrawal and aggressive conduct, before they become detrimental to the ongoing dialogue (Patterson et al., 2012).

As Rowley (2019) summarized, it is important to avoid emotional reactions by staying focused on the objective, create open and safe conversations by respecting and valuing the opinions of others, and avoid disagreements by first stating the facts before sharing stories, assumptions, and viewpoints. Leaders should help participants prevent confounding beliefs with facts. Implementing these guidelines can help leaders navigate crucial discussions better to minimize organizational conflict.

## **D. CONCLUSION**

COVID-19, BLM, and January 6 event affected the Naval organization's workforce in unexpected and unprecedented ways, bringing about crucial discussions. Existing literature provides guidance that can improve understanding of organizational conflicts, crucial conversations, and the requisite communications skills for properly facilitating these conversations. Increased understanding and skills can enhance U.S. Navy supervisors' ability to manage and coordinate crucial discussions.

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### III. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

This research analyzed semi-structured interviews about three events and compared responses across the cases and demographic groups. The analysis focused on U.S. Navy's communication about challenging external events from approximately March 2020 through March 2021. We focused on communication about the following events: the COVID-19 pandemic, protests associated with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, and the January 6 attack on the Capitol. We conducted interviews designed to solicit the experiences and perceptions of sailors identifying with minority and majority groups. We conducted a thematic analysis of the interviews, comparing the three events and between the minority and majority groups.

We conducted individual interviews, in-person and virtually, to solicit and document perceptions, experiences, and challenges that the participants faced when responding to events related to inclusion and diversity, as well as to document perceptions of supervisors' handling the response to the events. Qualitative research is appropriate for describing individuals' real-time experiences (Seidman, 2019). Interviewing allowed participants to relate their experiences.

The researchers relied on their subjective understanding to analyze and interpret data. This method is a necessary limitation in this study but allows analyses of sensitive topics and social phenomena. The researchers conducted a within and between case analysis, meaning the researchers focused first on each participant's responses to each event and then compared key takeaways between the three events. The analysis also focused on identifying participants' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the training and conversations given and received regarding the three critical events. The analysis also focused on identifying participants' perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of the training and conversations given and received regarding the three critical events. Following the analysis, we synthesized the findings to recommend key training objectives and learning strategies for Naval Officers and supervisors.

## A. QUALITATIVE DATA ANALYSIS

Contrary to the quantitative approach, the qualitative research method is geared toward creating a complete and detailed explanation of the researcher's observation. Therefore, it is apparent that in the qualitative analysis approach, the non-numerical data collected offers concepts, opinions, interpretations, and experiences and not predictions and causal explanations. Additionally, qualitative research via the interview method is a more personal discussion about a topic and can be used to collect in-depth insights and requires a smaller number of carefully chosen respondents (Gill et al., 2008).

Qualitative research is usually utilized to understand people's experiences and opinions (Macdonald et al., 2008). The interviews used in this study were semi-structured following guidelines for ethnographic and conversational interviews. The goal of each question is to engage the participant in an interesting conversation while soliciting examples and perceptions. In using the qualitative approach, each participant was encouraged to focus on events, perceptions, and ideas most important to them. The questions in this study focused on general topics, and the researchers' used probes and adapted to each participant's lead. The order and emphasis of topics varied for each participant.

Qualitative interviews allow the researchers to have an advantaged access to people's real-life experiences. This type of interview is a structured and purposeful conversation that allows the researchers to the participant's points of view, analyze their experiences before scientific explanations (Brinkman & Kvale 2015). The goal of a qualitative interview is to understand an experience from the participant's standpoint, communicated and described in precise detail in their own words. This type of interview will also help the researchers understand the participant's behavior, phenomenon, and opinion. In other words,

In summary, the qualitative method was deemed appropriate by the researchers of this study to document and analyze the participant's point of view on the socio-political effects of critical events that affected numerous people worldwide. According to Creswell (2018), qualitative studies are most suitable when a person's experience and point of view

of the topic answer the questions “how” and “what” to describe what happened during the event.

## **B. FORMULATION OF THE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

When creating interview questions, it is crucial to create research questions that will gather as much data as possible on the study phenomena. Easily comprehended questions should be asked before proceeding to difficult ones consecutively (Britten, 1999). This method will allow participants to build trust, connection, and confidence in answering more sensitive questions.

Interview questions must be sufficiently detailed and open-ended ensuring participants that no harm will happen to them by participating (Charmaz, 2008). The researchers of this study followed Brinkmann & Kvale’s (2015) assumption of practical interview questions — that they can be evaluated concerning both a thematic and dynamic dimension. A thematic dimension yields knowledge from the participant while dynamic promotes the interpersonal relationship in the interview. The objectives of this study are to collect first-person experience and attempt to access the participant’s feelings, concepts, and thoughts. The questions were tailored according to N17’s primary question: “What are the perceptions, experiences, and challenges of U.S. Naval Officers from the majority and underrepresented groups when responding to the critical events that occurred from March 2020 through March 2021.”

The objectives are not easily achieved as the questions asked by the participants to talk about personal events or experiences. To resolve this issue, the researchers followed Seidman’s (2019) recommendation that the interviewers not only identify their connection with the interview subject but must also affirm their interest in the participants’ story.

Lastly, according to (Roberts, 2020), the wordings chosen to formulate the interview questions are imperative to maximize the data gathered. In this study, the researchers developed an interview guide with the following parameters:

1. Introduction of researchers (name, rank, etc.) and the overview of the purpose of the interview.

2. Questions were formulated so interviewees could help answer research questions.
3. The sequence of the questions or topics was grouped into key takeaways.
4. The questions were formulated so the interviewer could move back and forth between questions/topics (flexibility).
5. Leading questions were not acceptable.

Developing an interview guide helps keep the interviewer, and the participant focused on the research goal, facilitating a more profound response from interviewees (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The researchers of this study carefully crafted an interview guide that helped them construct a well-thought-out list of broad, open-ended questions that allowed participants to answer sincerely and express the thoughts most significant to them.

In summary, this study's questions were open-ended and structured to probe for more context. Social skills such as empathy, warmth, humor, and attentiveness were also considered essential during the interviews. The beginning of the interview gently pertains to what the study is trying to find out but also rapport-building questions that will make the rest of the interview smooth. The last question was created to provide closure for the interview, giving the respondent their perception of the turnout of events in their command. Lastly, the researchers ceased interviewing participants after reaching saturation, such that no new categories or key takeaways were emerging in the data.

### **C. DATA COLLECTION**

The researchers recruited participants through personal contacts and referrals. Seventy (70) participants were interviewed. The participants included naval officers identified as diverse races and communities with different sexual orientations and ranks ranging from O-1 to O-6. Participants represented diverse ethnicities, job communities, and different sexual orientations with ranks and roles (Division Officer, Department Head, OIC, CO, XO), their perspective (superior/non-superior), diversity (gender, ethnicity, cultural background), and experience level (junior or senior officer).

Since the interviews were more than a conversational interaction and the setting varied depending on the participant's philosophical orientation, before any interview took place, the researchers made sure that each interviewing rapport was established and that all questions were answered. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study and were given a guarantee of the ethical principles of privacy and discretion. These steps were utilized to provide the participants with an idea of what to expect from the interview and may increase the likelihood of honesty/validity and enable transparency. Lastly, to ensure productivity and attentiveness, the researchers of this study made sure that, as much as possible, the study setting was free from distractions and that the participants picked the time of the interview most convenient.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Audio recordings of interviews in this study were transcribed verbatim, each participant's personal information was anonymized to prevent identification, and then the transcriptions were checked for errors in contextual information via double checking (recording vs. text). This study utilized Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) ARP professional transcribing services, Microsoft Word, and Otter AI resources.

#### **D. DATA ANALYSIS: CODING AND THEMING**

Coding enables researchers to understand the phenomenon via the participant's world. Coding refers to the "topics, issues, similarities, and differences that are identified and revealed through the participants' narratives and then interpreted by the researcher" (Sutton et al., 2015). The researchers coded the interviews after all the research interviews were transcribed and checked.

In this study, the researchers coded using a Microsoft Excel workbook that dissected the three topics (COVID-19 pandemic, BLM protests, and January 6 attack on the capitol) into common "Top 3" responses (demographically sorted) that came up during the interviews.

Although no statistical tests can be used to check reliability and validity of qualitative research, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest other methods to establish trust and

confidence in findings. Trustworthiness has four components: 1) credibility—confidence in the truth of findings, 2) transferability—the applicability of the findings to other contexts, 3) dependability—consistency of the findings, and 4) confirmability—findings were molded by the participants, not the researcher’s bias, provocation, or interest (Lincoln et al., 1985). To establish the trustworthiness and credibility of the research, all three team members coded each transcript and then compared the similarities and differences in their codes. The process resulted in multiple revisions to the codes until the team reached agreement on codes that fully captured the data.

Theming refers to the process where codes are drawn from one or more transcripts to present the findings of qualitative research in a comprehensible way (Sutton et al., 2015). In this study, key takeaways captured participants’ narratives regarding their experiences of how their superiors handled the discussions, mitigated risks, or provided issue resolution when the three critical events were happening. Descriptions such as: “discussions were positive,” “negative,” “neutral.” or “discussions were not conducted” were grouped together as a key takeaway.

## **E. STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS**

This research approach has strengths and limitations. The semi-structured, one-on-one interview process allowed the researchers to gain an understanding of the participants’ experiences and perceptions to deeply understand how these experiences affected their workplace and work ethic. The researchers were able to collect rich information due to the opportunity to ask follow-up questions, probe further information, and connect questions to the participants during the interview.

Although qualitative research approaches provide an excellent opportunity to gather rich data about people’s experiences and perceptions motivations, there are several limitations. Interview questions are primarily open-ended, giving the participants control over data collection (Chetty, 2016). In this study, the interviews depended on the participant’s ability to recall details regarding the events; therefore, the researchers could not objectively verify the scenarios’ results. Analysis is based on the researchers’ interpretations of the data and their judgment. Therefore, the researcher’s experience and

knowledge influence the observations, interpretations, and analysis (Chetty, 2016). This study's analysis is based on participants' responses and findings rely on the participants' recollection of their experiences and events.

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## **IV. DISCUSSION OF INTERVIEWS**

The researchers of this study explored seventy (70) interview transcripts. This chapter summarizes and describes participants' experiences of sensitive conversations about external events, some of which were termed “necessary” and directed by Navy leaders. Appendix B lists the interviewees' demographics.

In this study, there were four key takeaways: First, some participants seemed optimistic about sensitive discussions because they believe that having a place to comfortably engage and share opinions promotes a positive work environment that will help achieve mission success. Second, some commands that never discussed the events. Participants suggested this was because the leaders either felt uncomfortable or were concerned about offending people. Third, some participants seemed neutral about not having sensitive conversations because, in their opinion, a discussion in a professional workplace should be limited to policy and not be driven by or focus on emotions. Lastly, some participants were extremely negative about sensitive discussions because they felt a lack of clarity, lack of genuineness, or lack of neutrality when leaders conducted such conversations.

### **A. POSITIVE PERCEPTIONS OF NECESSARY CONVERSATIONS**

Many interviewees perceived the necessary, sensitive conversations positively, although some of these did not participate in conversations either because their leaders did not hold the conversations or because the interviewees did not feel comfortable engaging in the conversations. Interviewees that perceived the conversations positively and had the opportunity to participate felt that the conversations offered a space to share perspectives and/or had a positive influence on the work environment and mission success. Some who perceived that conversations were (or would have been) positive did not get the opportunity to participate. This section discusses the perspectives of those who viewed the conversations positively, including those who did and did not participate.

## **1. Positive Perceptions of Participants in Necessary Conversations: A Place to Share**

Some participants found the sensitive discussions necessary and helpful because they offered new perspectives and created space to share opinions. One participant described that his command conducted voluntary training on socio-political discussions such as BLM and how the voluntary method effectively encouraged personnel to share their stories and opinions:

It was just a diversity conversation each week...it was all voluntary; it wasn't mandatory. They would have different speakers each week talking about their issues with discrimination in their past...They would open the floor up to anyone in the audience who wanted to talk about their experiences. It was eye-opening for me, like stuff that I wouldn't have experienced in my upbringing was er participant said that being sensitive and respectful to everyone's opinions make a discussion regarding BLM warranted and necessary:

I think that a lot of different disparities and discrepancies in the Navy could be discussed. And I think it's just being sensitive to everybody's perspectives and respecting people - that needed to happen. Separately, I sat on a racial disparity in the UCMJ; it was interesting to hear different perspectives on fairness in the UCMJ across a large cross-section of authorities. So, I think conversations about racial disparity and the leeway we have in the military [are needed] because we're not just interested in these people's jobs. (Subject D017)

Another participant stated that one positive impact of having the conversation about the January 6 event was to make sure people understood that racial insensitivity would not be tolerated in the military:

We talked about...[how] everybody's parked in the parking lot, and everyone's got decals on their truck or flags or things. People might think that a particular emblem means something to them from where they grew up or something like that; they don't realize how that might make another person feel. And when the attack on the Capitol was another incident where different groups within the United States have different agendas and ideologies that may or may not be positive. And so, before the attack, they [Navy] are a little bit lenient on what was allowed to what, in terms of decals, stickers, flags, and things like that. And then, the conversation became a little stricter in terms of ensuring that people understood that that wouldn't be tolerated. (Subject M026)

Also relating to the January 6 event, one participant commented that discussions helped present facts to counter any possible media misinformation:

Media drives a lot of people's internal understandings of stuff, and what they see there, they replicate what they interpret the meanings to be. So having a level of brief allowing people to understand that, hey, I know you've seen this. However, if you act on it this way, you're acting on this type of information. It might not be all the information, and it might be a politically driven source of information. So, make sure you behave professionally, you know what drives your decision-making process (Subject M001).

In conclusion, some participants appreciated having sensitive discussion in a command because the discussions created a place for people to share experiences and perspectives, creating a feeling of belongingness for everyone. Others viewed sensitive discussions positively because they felt the discussions helped to counteract misinformation.

## **2. Positive Perceptions of Participants in Necessary Conversations: Work and Work Environment**

Many participants expressed that discussions were important because the events significantly impacted either the workforce or the work/work environment. A participant explained that discussions on the COVID-19 pandemic were necessary because not only does COVID-19 impact the workforce, but most importantly, it affects the mission:

[As a leader] You don't know what background...[sailors] come from. You don't know exactly how their mind works on a day-to-day basis, so some things that would be common sense to us are not always common sense to them. So that, hey, don't be an idiot, don't go out drinking at a packed nightclub two days before we go on deployment—which is, as you know, not uncommon for a 21-year-old kid. A good leader in our situation, both the captain and the department head, has to have those conversations with those guys because they're vital and they're important to meet mission success. (Subject A005)

Relatedly, a different participant explained that leaders not confronting or discussing sensitive conversations such as the BLM event can cause a disconnect between service members, making it hard for them to work with each other:

We need to normalize discussion and disagreement about different viewpoints on subjects that are sensitive to some without that spiraling into arguments and hostility... For my XO to sit there in silence and exude the kind of attitude that he was...standoff-ish and not wanting to participate in the conversation makes mixed feelings about it. It's that he didn't think he had anything valuable to contribute to the discussion, which would be alarming because he's an O5, right? Or he didn't think that the captain liked it. I'm trying to figure out why he wasn't engaging with us. None of it was positive, though. So, the overall impression that he left is that you didn't want to talk about it, for whatever reason. And it caused a disconnect, which was a personal discussion as opposed to a professional development discussion. Still, it's hard not to have that bleed over in my other interactions with him afterwards (Subject M006).

In the same context, a participant expressed that discussions on the January 6 event were necessary as information and facts will significantly impact Naval officers' conduct in the workplace: "The [NPS] students knowing that their leadership is aware of outside events and political events could significantly impact how [Naval] Officers act in the workplace and is important. So, I think it was imperative for them to address what was happening and condemn the actions of people who took place in that event" (Subject M009).

Specifically, on the subject of BLM, some participants believed that the event's significance to the workforce warranted discussion. A participant described how his command acknowledged the BLM event and how it empowered affected sailors to share their opinions with the department: "There was a recognition that some sailors [who] were very effective [were] affected and sympathetic to the movements. And so, there was recognition like, these folks, regardless of what you think of the movement, have valid concerns and opinions that need to be heard and discussed. So overall, the department was sympathetic to that (Subject D009)." Another participant expressed that it is important to talk about the BLM event to remind everyone in the organization that certain actions, such as discrimination, will not be tolerated in the military:

... there's a problem that people don't want to talk about, but now everybody knows. And it was about letting everybody know that the Department of Defense knew about the challenges and that we were not trying just to let them be. Actions were being taken to ensure that things like discrimination or anything like that wouldn't happen at work. So, we're trying to provide

an example of, hey, that could happen in the local police department, but that's not going to happen in the Department of Defense. (Subject A007)

Although workforce impact seemed to be a motivating factor for discussing BLM, some participants viewed the discussions about COVID and the January 6 event as positive because of how those events impacted institutions and the overall work environment. One participant explained how discussions on the COVID-19 pandemic could greatly affect how subordinates follow their superior's guidance: "I believe that [the discussions] were necessary because, in the absence of explaining, people would question the actual dangers of it. So, if the command leadership did not perceive it as something real, it would be hard for others to follow (Subject A001)." Similarly, Subject M021 explained that discussions regarding the January 6 event are significant because it is a threat to the nation's security, which is the military's primary concern:

I think having a discussion is important. Because obviously, that has never happened before. The country's history before is how democracy should be; and how this country should be when in terms of trying to go along the processes that we have. An elected president and a few people are coming together to try to change that or not allow that to happen and take place. Taking place disrupts the government and our normal processes, which shouldn't happen. We aren't necessarily political, but we were run by the government and should be aware of what's going on. And so, I think that is at least something that should be talked about. (Subject M21)

In conclusion, some participants believed that sensitive conversations were warranted because they affect both the workplace and the workforce. Participants explained that conversations about the COVID-19 pandemic greatly affect the workplace as discussing this topic will help prepare a command to combat the spread of the virus, minimizing losing personnel in a watch bill. Participants perceived that conversations regarding BLM and the Jan. 6 seem to impact the workforce because these events sometimes challenge peoples' civic, social, and cultural beliefs.

### **3. Positive Perceptions of Participants in Necessary Conversations: Alternative Perspectives**

Even though many participants' responses revealed that they perceived the discussions as being relevant and even important to their work or organization, there were

a few outliers. For example, a participant stated that a workplace discussion regarding BLM was warranted but not necessary:

I think it was probably warranted. It shouldn't have been necessary. But I think given you know it was a big event, right? It kind of forced itself. Unfortunately, it forced itself to have a conversation. There are kind of bigger things than BLM. It's sad that we, you know, here it is, 2020 or 2021 2022, feel like we have to have these conversations. But again, you don't dictate that right. Society dictates life. And so, I think it was warranted. But unfortunately, it was not necessary (Subject D011).

Comparably, another participant stated that discussions regarding politics or events like the Jan.6 attack should not be a focus in the workforce; instead, the mission should be the topmost priority: "...political activism is not, that's not a focus that we should be - stopping work and talking about all these different events. Our focus is the flight schedule, the flight line training, and readiness; so many other things affect our daily lives (Subject M007)."

Some participants noted that the conversations were uncomfortable but still appreciated that they took place. A participant shared his experience regarding the conflict around COVID-19 vaccinations:

I think it [discussion by CoC] was helpful. People had very strong feelings about COVID - about getting vaccinated, about vaccinating their children. Who the f\*ck wants to vaccinate your kid with something that's brand-new and has never been tested? So, you know, there were a lot of WTF moments where everybody was kind of looking at each other. It was uncomfortable, but I think everybody made the best of it. Our leadership was fairly open. Everything was non-retribution-al like you could ask a question; nobody was going to be like, 'Look here, man, the nail that sticks out gets hammered down.' I didn't see any of that. (Subject D003)

Similarly, another participant expressed his satisfaction with how his command handled the BLM conversation: "It [...shared] a lot of perspectives, and it was an avenue of voice for people who, in that ethnicity, feel suppressed by how they live and then how they're scrutinized in their way of life. Because, you know, people don't talk about it. And I think it was a good avenue to talk about it to address the elephant in the room (is a phrase used to say if there is something very obvious that one can't miss, yet no one wants to be the person to point it out. It's simply assumed that everyone has noticed it,) (Subject

M014)." Another contributor explained how his superiors discussed the January 6 event even though the topic was sensitive: "I can understand...having an uncomfortable conversation...one of my superiors came out of the comfort zone, it's okay. Like, I know this is [difficult for] some people, and I'm willing to have these discussions and listen, then come to a common ground. Because...my department did not want to have our work center [...have] that negative impact and wanted to be heard and move forward and work together to make a better working environment. (Subject M016)."

In conclusion, there are a few outliers who had different opinions regarding the discussion of sensitive topics. Not all participants shared the opinion that the conversations were necessary. Additionally, some participants admitted that the conversations were uncomfortable, but they appreciated their superiors coming out of their comfort zones and discussing the events with the crew.

#### **4. Positive Perceptions of Necessary Conversations Without Participating**

Some participants were interested in having these discussions but never had the opportunity because it was too uncomfortable for other people in the command. For example, a contributor shared his experience in his command regarding the BLM attack: "It was probably either uncomfortable, or they just didn't want to discuss it. So, we didn't. We had it in groups, but we didn't get together. We did stuff virtually amongst ourselves and some of our teammates to bring up this issue...we did not have a stand-up opportunity to discuss it." (Subject D005). Correspondingly, another participant stated that his Commanding Officer did not think a discussion regarding the BLM event was necessary, maybe because he was uncomfortable: "My superior felt that it was all unnecessary. I think he [CO] felt that people viewed him as a racist because he won't talk about it. He came in one morning and said, 'I hate people staring at me like I'm a racist.' And, you know, I encouraged him that we should discuss it. We talked about having special people come in to have that discussion, but we did not execute (Subject A002)." The same participant from the same command stated that his experience was similar when he was expecting his CoC to talk about the January 6 event:

I think any superior that doesn't address the pink elephant in the room leaves room for people to develop their theory, and, most likely, it's that you don't care. So, if we as leaders feel uncomfortable talking to gay people, or talking to Black people, or don't feel we can relate, we have missed the mark on seeing our humanity and that it doesn't matter what color you are; pain is pain, grief is grief. You know, a feeling of belonging. There's a sense of belonging and pride in what you do, so if a leader doesn't address those things when it disrupts that or when a group of people is singled out, if you don't address that and make sure that they feel welcome inside of the ranks and organization that they're a part of...silence is compliance. You're essentially agreeing with what society is depicting (Subject A002).

Relatedly, a different participant described how the discussion after the January 6 event was challenging and how it affected him: "If you know your people, you will know their political views immediately. I can already tell that the people [in my workplace] at that time were Trump supporters; they felt more [strongly], that was what kind of made work uncomfortable (Subject M014)."

**Adjacent to these sentiments were those who felt discouraged from speaking up.** A participant stated when asked if he conducted a conversation about BLM with his department: "To be clear, I'm a White dude, and nobody will let me say anything about Black Lives Matter without attacking me. Let's just be real. There's no space to say anything without opening myself up." The same person also added when asked if there was something he wanted to say or do but did not feel comfortable doing: "It's something where I couldn't be sure that there wouldn't have been punitive issues with me having a conversation like that, to be honest. Like that's—you know, it is what it is. Like nobody cares about reality or truth. They care about the color of your skin. And it's not my place to say anything about that stuff (Subject D003)." Similarly, another participant explained that he felt excluded and discouraged from feeling anything or speaking up regarding the BLM topic:

I feel like I'm not allowed to feel anything about it. Being at a command where people could not empathize with what the real issue was, was a problem for me. I was fortunate to directly ask the CNO what his litmus test was regarding accountability regarding diversity, inclusion, and equal opportunity. How do you hold people accountable? How do you hold the folks who are the coalition of the unwilling? He said, 'It's hard.' There are Black sailors who are still seeing whites-only signs put up while they're

underway. And then it's laughed at, like, it's a joke. There is no support system. There's no leadership accountability to ensure these Navy programs are in place. (Subject M015).

## **5. Conclusion: Positive Perceptions of Command Leadership**

**However, it seems that some commands did not have this problem.** One participant was very satisfied with how her command discussed the BLM event, as leaders helped everyone feel comfortable, and they were encouraged to share their experiences and opinions:

The Black Lives Matter protests [were] addressed. It was part of that guided discussion. We had several senior people in the organization address the group, people with a lot of experiences from previous commands, and people with things they've dealt with in their own lives. Some of those people could address the larger group, maintaining the audience's respect and getting their point across in a way everyone could feel. Everyone felt welcome to be part of the conversation. I thought that was a very positive thing (Subject M026).

Comparably, a different subject stated that his command gave everyone affected by the BLM event a way to voice out their concerns and issues as well as share their opinions: "We had a direct sit-down with the whole division. And I think we invited one of the other divisions, so we had the CMEO come out and speak. That allowed everyone to voice their concerns that they had sort of in their group stage. So, we could at least discuss the issue, let people vent, share their thoughts, opinions, and experiences, and give them a forum to be heard."

## **B. NEUTRAL PERCEPTIONS OF NECESSARY CONVERSATIONS**

1. When discussions—assuming they occurred—were perceived as neutral or policy-based.

Some participants perceived the sensitive conversations as neutral or policy based. Most discussions regarding the COVID-19 pandemic were viewed as needed due to the CDC requirements/guidelines that the Navy needs to follow to prevent the spread of the disease. Additionally, conversations regarding BLM or the Jan.6 event were perceived to be needed so long as they were policy-based and not opinionated.

Some participants recalled that in lieu of formal discussions, their leadership disseminated information through less formal channels with less consistency. For example, a subject explained that his leadership did not discuss in detail the issues of COVID-19: “I mean, I wasn’t seeing any leadership. I think the training unless you have to train, you’re not seeing each other. You’re not going to show up to muster because it’s not mandatory. An email could suffice. There was no big discussion about COVID. It was information pushed out through email, discussing the dangers and the need to implement telework (Subject D001).” Comparably, a different participant explained how his CoC dealt with the COVID-19 Pandemic: “It wasn’t discussed in depth. We only got informal guidance on it when the pandemic broke out (Subject M006).” Similarly, a third participant said that her CoC relied heavily on the medical department and also struggled to put out the right guidance for the crew regarding the COVID-19 Pandemic: “We had a medical department. So, I think they did try to rely on us as much as possible. And I do feel like our medical department tried to push out information and guidance as they got it. There was a lot of shifting in the guidance. And I think, in some ways, that caused confusion and caused some people not to take it seriously because it’s like, the so-called experts [leadership] don’t know (Subject D009).”

Several participants stated that guidelines and factual information led communications and discussions, especially pertaining to COVID. For example, a contributor explained: “I think it’s just more of following the CDC’s guidelines. There were no emotions attached to it. The CO’s message was about the topic, which is usually in line with what the CDC said. It wasn’t so much of a positive or negative; it was more informational (Subject D002).” Another contributor stated that his leadership was stringent about following only the CDC guidance and facts regarding the pandemic:

There were certainly some discussions about what to believe and what we really know and what works, what doesn’t. So, I think people couldn’t have their personal opinions come in. I would say, you know, that’s a water cooler conversation. I will tell you when we look at even the way we talk about COVID today, in my command, we don’t freelance. We follow the CDC guidance. It’s our North star DoD guidance, DLA headquarters policy guidance. When you’re talking about communicating with the workforce, you kind of stick to your guns and put aside any personal opinions on masking and this and that. These are the guidelines we’re following, and

these are the expectations. That helps minimize questions or the emotions that go behind it. We just stick to the facts as best we know. Let the pundits and social media debate, but that's the good thing about, you know, having policy and guidance. It's at least something you can hold your hand on. I think it's been effective so far (Subject D011).

A third subject summarized that his CoC did their best to share known facts regarding COVID despite a lot of misinformation being circulated in his workplace:

I felt like my superiors were pretty transparent. I mean, if there was information that they knew, I felt like people were sharing it. I was working in a pretty civilian-dominated work environment. But so, I think there was a level of professionalism and sharing that came from that environment. But again, there was a lot of misinformation going around so I felt like the leadership did the best they could to give the information they knew was factual. It was very difficult for them to combat the misinformation that was spinning around (Subject D027).

In contrast to those who expressed that they appreciated the opportunity to hear and share personal perspectives and opinions, many other participants stated that discussions in the workplace should be guided by policy and regulation, not by emotions or opinions. For example, a participant explained when asked if BLM discussions were warranted in a workplace:

Again, for anything significant, as a leader, you just step in and make sure you're professional. Here's the policy, here's the regulation. Don't express your opinion; personal opinions don't matter. Here's the policy. Here's the regulation. And I think a conversation is warranted in trying to understand the challenges your coworkers face, how can we all help each other, or how we can all support each other. But when you focus on personal opinions and if something's valid, if you're validating or invalidating something, it's just going to lead to more problems, I think (Subject D018).

Comparably, regarding the BLM topic, a different participant explained that his CoC told the command to keep their opinions to themselves and stick with the facts: “They [CoC] literally said keep the opinion to yourself. Don't do anything stupid and not follow rules. People are entitled to their opinion and what they want to do, just don't do it in uniform (Subject M018).”

Similarly, another participant described how his CoC handled the Jan.6 event discussion by sticking to the facts: “They [CoC] approached the discussions which said,

I'm [CO] not going to get into an argument, disagreement, long-form discussion on the merits of anything. Here's the policy and how it applies. Here are things that don't do this. I think they went out of their way to eliminate the possibility of the discussion being hijacked. We're just discussing facts; we're [CoC] going to eliminate your perspective on this. And just, hey, here are the constraints. And here's the lane lines (Subject D029).” Another subject reflected on how his superiors focused on work-related constraints on political feelings during the Jan. 6 event discussion: “He [CO] kept it work-centric because it was a political-type movement. His message was probably a little blunter than most chain-of-command's message of putting your political feelings aside; He said: ‘Whether you have felt that they were right or wrong, I don't care at this moment. We have a job to go out to do. Put your political feelings aside. You might have a political opinion one way or another right now, but right now, you don't. You are part of the military, and we'll go out and do a job (Subject A005).’” Once more, another interviewee stated that the Jan 6. discussions focused on rules and limits:

I think they [Chain of command] did exactly what I would have expected them to do, which, again, was to publish the regulations and the policy, stick with the rules aggressively make sure everybody knew what their boundaries were. Because that was going to be the way that they could protect their sailors. You can't stop them [sailors] from saying or doing silly stuff. But you can empower them with the knowledge to know where their limits should be. Those lines need to be aggressively reminded to everybody before they go too far (Subject D027).

In conclusion, the participants who had neutral perceptions of sensitive conversations believed that these discussions were warranted if they were guided by policy and guidelines. Political affiliation, personal opinions, and other emotions should be set aside. These participants expressed that rules should be followed, and boundaries established to avoid conflict among personnel.

## **C. NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS OF NECESSARY CONVERSATIONS**

1. When discussions—assuming they occurred—were perceived negatively.

The majority of participants who did not find discussions valuable seemed to regard the discussions as just checking a box; maybe due to lack of clarity, lack of genuineness,

or lack of neutrality. For example, when asked about any challenges he experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic, one participant replied: “The telework policy and people abusing the quarantine policy. This was because there was not enough clarity, discussion, and direction from leadership (Subject A010).” Comparably, another participant described how his leadership did not disseminate enough information to the crew or discuss COVID-19 properly: “I don't know the type of information they [CoC] were getting. I feel like the command was more so trying to protect themselves. I don't feel like it was enough. I feel like they put out just because they weren't thinking about their manning as well (Subject M008).” In a similar opinion, a subject stated his perception of how his leaders handled the BLM discussion: “To me, it seemed like a check in the box to talk about things we all know. I thought we were saying the same thing in 50 different ways. Like I had to piggyback off everyone, I was only saying the same thing but with two different policies (Subject D001).”

Furthermore, a participant stated that he thought his leaders and the Navy handled the BLM discussion ineffectively, which gave the impression that they were just going through the motions:

I think we tend to gut-react. We don't think through our reaction, we don't consider a tailored response. We just kicked it into high gear and made a check in the box and the Navy just didn't bother checking the box to officially save a mental wicket then they did something. It's frustrating. Why are we even doing this if you're doing something when you don't believe in it, and there's not a solid point that you've brought everybody's attention to...? It almost... it's almost like it does more damage. It just makes people disbelieve in the organization just a little bit more (Subject D018).

Relatedly, another subject described that because of the length of his military career, the Jan 6 discussion only confirmed what he already knew, which made the discussion feel like just another check in the box: “I personally did not find it helpful. But again, I feel like I've been in long enough where you sort of know, like, what's acceptable and what's not. So, when there's something that's considered unacceptable? It's like, there's not much value. It's more like a check in the box that listens to those lectures and doesn't do it. Like, alright, the command mandated we need to do this, probably because it was

mandated by the Navy to do it. And so, we're having this conversation. Box checked (Subject D009)." Likewise, a different participant stated that even though the Jan 6 discussion was necessary, it didn't provide clarity and therefore was inadequate: "I think it was definitely necessary. But it was inadequate. It is important to maintain what we fight for every day. We were in the military to protect the Constitution and everything it stands for and then what the heck happened that day? No, it was inadequate, but I know their [superiors] hearts were in the right place. (Subject M016)."

The participants who viewed the sensitive conversations negatively did not necessarily think that the discussions were not warranted. Most of the interviewees revealed that the discussions were not effective or valuable because they lacked substance, neutrality, or genuineness.

## **V. RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION**

### **A. INTRODUCTION**

This study sought to analyze the experiences and perceptions of majority and underrepresented groups regarding their superiors' handling of conversations about the three critical events between March 2020 to March 2021: the COVID-19 pandemic, BLM protests, and the January 6 attack on the capitol.

This chapter summarizes the researcher's interpretation and findings regarding the experiences and perceptions of Naval officers on how the Navy and their superiors engaged in discussions related to critical events and difficult conversations. (Request guidance on how to make this intro better). In the end, our study found that attitudes towards difficult conversations were positive when these discussions were helpful and informative; attitudes tended to be negative when these discussions were perceived as performative and irrelevant to completing work or mission.

The sample was limited to 70 participants, who were recruited through personal contacts and referrals, and all of them were Officers. Our findings are exploratory and limited to this population. Therefore, future researchers who wish to elaborate on this study should recruit a larger, random sample sailors and include Enlisted ranks.

### **B. CONCLUSIONS AND INTERPRETATION OF THE ANALYSIS**

Our study concludes that some Naval leadership was reactive instead of proactive in handling conversations about critical events. Participants perceived that the Navy was always ready to combat adversaries in the warfighting world, but was less prepared to engage in other battles, such as the pandemic and other sensitive issues, that penetrated the home front. Participants responses suggest that the Navy needs additional tools to permanently protect its personnel from these types of threats.

#### **1. Positive Perceptions**

Most of the participants in this study perceived that their leaders were engaging in difficult conversations positively because doing so provided a space for affected sailors to

share different perspectives. The participants also thought engaging in challenging discussions was essential in a workplace because they directly influence their work environment and mission success. Some participants appreciated being able to discuss issues that affected others, like the BLM topic, because it made everyone in the workplace understand each other's diversity in politics, religion, ethics, or norms (Shonk, K., 2022). Overall, the participants that had positive perceptions believed that having a safe place to share different points of view allowed sailors to understand racial sensitivity and correct any media misinformation, and that such sharing may have mitigated conflict that would have otherwise stemmed from individual differences.

Many participants believed that these conversations were necessary since the magnitude of the events affected the work environment. For example, the COVID-19 pandemic elevated sailors' stress levels in addition to causing physiological illness. Having COVID-19-related conversations at work made sailors aware of how to prevent transmission of the virus or at least minimize the spread of the disease in the command to maintain mission readiness and national security. Similarly, the tension surrounding the BLM subject and the January 6<sup>th</sup> attack affected all sailors. Lastly, some participants deemed that difficult conversations increased feelings of inclusion within the organization, which may improve morale and camaraderie in the workplace.

## **2. Negative Perceptions**

Participants who expressed negative perceptions of crucial workplace conversations often attributed them to the absence of substance, genuineness, or neutrality. Bradley & Cambell (2016) described that these interactions are frequently dodged or sidestepped. By their very nature, sensitive topic discussions are inherently complex, and the unfortunate reality is that not everyone possesses the specialized skills necessary to navigate the desired dialogue positively and productively.

This problem is exacerbated by general supervisor inexperience regarding workplace communication of hyper-divisive sociopolitical issues. Our findings are consistent with the literature, which notes that meaningful employee support and proper individual preparation are essential precursors to the successful execution of controversial

conversations (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017). Insufficient knowledge about the conduct of crucial conversations or the topic at hand will be adversely perceived by audiences. Unprepared facilitators lack the required substance and are counterproductive to organizational DEI efforts.

Additionally, our findings are consistent with the recommendations of Welch & Parker (2020) who note that leaders should focus on the true purpose of the conversation—the sharing of perspectives, the raising of collective understanding, and improving mutual regard—instead of trying to persuade or convert others to their point of view. This behavior would undoubtedly come across as disingenuous and one-sided.

### **3. Neutral Perceptions**

The participants in this study who expressed neutral perceptions on crucial conversations were those who perceived that their leaders avoided these discussions because of their fear of making issues worse. These leaders may not want to engage while unprepared due to a lack of knowledge on starting a discussion on sensitive topics. These leaders were also perceived to be avoiding these conversations to mitigate the risks of handling the situation poorly or creating a conflict between individuals of different socio-political points of view.

Another reason for neutral perceptions on crucial conversations surfaced mostly when sailors discussed the COVID-19 topic. Sailors who expressed neutral perceptions often perceived their leaders as policy-based; avoiding or minimizing organizational conflict by only stating facts. Sailors perceived these leaders as avoiding human reactions and staying focused on informing the crew of mission readiness.

Lastly, some participants thought that crucial conversations were warranted if the discussions were guided by policy. The same participants were told by their CoC to keep their opinions to themselves regarding the policies and guidelines of the Navy on the three topics. Their leaders wanted the workforce to stay neutral and follow the rules the Navy had set in place. These leaders told sailors that if they wanted to express their opinions, they could do so as long as they were not in uniform.

### C. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

There are several notable limitations in this research. First, the sample size is limited to 70 people who were recruited through personal contacts and referrals. Thus, while the findings describe the perceptions of respondents and suggest important implications, they can't be directly generalized to the entire Navy.

Second, the sample composition does not fully represent the composition of the Navy. This study was limited to Naval Officers only, with ranks ranging from Ensign to Captain, which did not allow rank variation. Enlisted members were not interviewed. However, Enlisted personnel with pay grades ranging from E-7 to E-9 are also considered supervisors, and their opinions should be considered in further research. Additionally, most participants were Supply Corps Officers due to their willingness to participate. Therefore, the background, the designator's cultural views, and work-related experiences may have slightly affected this study's generalized results.

Third, this research is based on interview responses which may induce bias based on: 1) Selective memory (vagueness of the experiences or events that took place years ago), 2) Telescoping (recalling of events that only occurred once), 3) Exaggeration (embellishing events) (Brutus et al., 2013).

During this capstone research project, we faced several challenges worth noting. First and foremost, attaining equal participation across the demographic spectrum of contributors was formidable. Although we tried our best to achieve a representative distribution of participants, this was not entirely possible due to a limited number of volunteers. Nonetheless, we assess that participants responses provide meaningful insight into their perceptions and experiences.

Achieving an equivalent level of subject forthcomingness across all three topics was difficult and, at times, impossible. It was evident that many interviewees were uncomfortable discussing specific issues on the record. This observation was reinforced by the fact that several participants openly admitted to disingenuously answering questions in post-interview conversations—some even expressed that they "...would never risk discussing these topics honestly" out of fear of professional retribution.

Lastly, qualitative research and its associated data-gathering methods, such as observations and interviews, are subjective (Bumbuc, 2016). The purpose of this research is to describe participants' perceptions. Our grouping and interpretation of the implications of these perceptions is our own. We followed a systematic coding process and discussed our interpretations with each other and faculty advisors to guard against our own biases.

To address these limitations, future research should expand the sample of the population and scope of issues. Researchers should conduct similar studies that include enlisted Sailors and civilian employees that work directly with military members and compare the results and findings to this study. Researchers should also expand the project scope to include other majority and minority socio-political issues such as Asian hate, antisemitism, women's issues, (#metoo movement, abortion, etc.), immigration, reverse racism, and critical race theory.

This study makes an important contribution to understanding perceptions of difficult conversations in the Navy. The Navy recognizes the need to protect sailors and create a positive work environment. Towards this end, the Navy directed leaders to engage in necessary conversations. It is likely that divisive events will continue to emerge. By describing participant's perceptions of past difficult conversations, this this study provides a basis for better preparation and improved outcomes.

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## APPENDIX. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The questions asked during the interview were asked for all the three important events this study is focused on, one event at a time, general to specific, and in the chronological order that they occurred:

- **COVID-19 pandemic (WHO Pandemic Declaration: March 11, 2020)**
- **BLM protests (George Floyd's Death: May 25, 2020)**
- **Attack on the Capitol (January 6, 2021)**

### How did the discussion surface at your place of work?

- If “it wasn't discussed (not even by the interviewee)”
- Why not? (explain/expand/elaborate)
- Why didn't you discuss it? (explain/expand/elaborate)
- If “it was discussed”
- Do you think the discussion was necessary? (y/n)
- Why? (explain/expand/elaborate)

### How did your superiors handle the (event) discussion?

- Please describe the COVID-19 pandemic in detail (facilitator, attendance requirement, group size, audience composition, length, location, discussion type, general demeanor/environment).
- Please provide an example of when a superior demonstrated a positive way of discussing (event) and a negative way of discussing (possibility) (one each -> explain/expand/elaborate)

- What is your perception of your superior's response? (How did it make you feel? Did anything go wrong? Did anything surprising happen? How would you rate the discussion? Did it help?).

**Did you arrange or facilitate an (event) discussion?**

- Please describe your discussion in detail (facilitator, attendance requirement, group size, audience composition, length, location, discussion type, general demeanor/environment).
- What are your perceptions/experiences of the event? (How did it make you feel, did anything go wrong, did anything surprising happen, how would you rate the discussion, did it help).
- What challenges did you experience? (explain/expand/elaborate)

**How did the (event) conversation/challenges change over time?**

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