



(Photo by Steven L. Shepard, Presidio of Monterey PAO)

Volunteers attach teal-colored ribbons to trees and other objects across the Presidio 25 September 2013 to raise awareness about sexual assault as part of the Teal Ribbon Campaign.

# SHARP Realities

## Perspectives in Tackling the Army's Number One Priority

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**T**he Sexual Harassment and Assault Response and Prevention Program (SHARP) is a high priority as an “enduring mission” across the force. Almost universally there is an understanding

that the Army’s culture, the military’s culture, has to change. Given that near-universal understanding, there have been commensurately few essays or articles in military professional media that address

the status of the Army's SHARP efforts critically. Generally, the institutional Army is attacking this problem as hard as it has anything in its history. However, in addressing the issues involved, it still struggles with exactly what the culture is that is in need of change and precisely what needs to be done to fix it.

There are different schools of thought about this effort. Some soldiers see themselves first as victims of Congress rather than as advocates for the real victims and leaders and stewards of the environments in which these crimes occur. Some suggest that the military is comparatively better off than, say, college campuses, at least in terms of raw percentages. This implies that the real problem in the military is one of the society instead, and it ignores the question of what should be done to change the culture.

Others adopt the related attitude that we are going to shoulder this burden for society and that we will lead the way, just as the Army did for racial and gender integration. The unstated theme of this attitude is, similarly, that "we know we are not as bad as the civilians are on these issues, but we accept this mission anyway because we need to make it right, and we'll be doing the country a service by leading the way for what is right." On the surface, this way of approaching the problem appears less wrongheaded, but again, it fails to understand the depth of the task at hand. This may signal to Congress that the military is willing and able to settle the problems of assault and harassment once and for all, but it fails to directly address the culture we have to change.

## Quality Versus Quantity

These perspectives are encouraged and compounded by the impulse to track sexual assaults and harassment (equal opportunity and equal employment opportunity issues as well as SHARP issues) within the military in terms of statistics.

The metrics involved are misleading because they influence the people leading efforts to reduce sexual assault and harassment to confuse symptoms with causes. Metric-driven approaches can create the illusion that leaders are doing something to influence causes when they are not; they are watching the problem play out. In that sense, the statistics, though undeniably valuable for gauging the problem (not for

directly fixing it), are something of a red herring. The culture has to be understood, and only when understood can it be changed.

What exactly is the culture that needs to be changed? The qualitative dimension of the problem within the military is its power dynamic. In the civilian sector, the power dynamic is mostly economic; wealth equals power. Employees who are victims have legal avenues outside the chain to address harassment and assault and, in the back of their minds, they do not worry about a chain of authority over them that also has legal jurisdiction over them, as soldiers worry. The lawful authority of the military is the obvious reason why it has an urgent problem that has festered and eroded trust among soldiers.

That authority can make life hell for the soldier who rejects a quid pro quo sexual offer, for instance. Usually that soldier is very young and inexperienced and may not understand resources available outside the soldier's chain of command. Analytical data used in sexual assault review boards should clearly identify chain-of-command abuse reported, as this is a reflection of the uniqueness of the problem within the military. Most do that now. For every report of assault, there is a likelihood (according to Criminal Investigation Division estimates) that the actual number will be 80 percent higher. So, the metric for understanding the quality resting under the surface, alarmingly, also points to the quantity of unreported abuse taking place "under the radar."

## Culture: Sexual Objectification in a Military Setting

When one exercises great power, such as legal authority over others, and lacks moral sense, maturity, or wisdom, this exercise inevitably becomes entangled with basic impulses. It winds up mixing in sexual dynamics, as hard as that fact is for many to admit or to face. In power-authority relationships, such as the rank hierarchies in the military, sexual impulse often arises overtly, as we have frequently seen of late with cases where superiors became sexually involved with subordinates on a consensual basis in illegal and inappropriate relationships. However, if a lower-ranking person rejects a consensual relationship, the situation often ends in sexual harassment or assault.



(Photo by Staff Sgt. Michael Beck, South Dakota National Guard)

Sgt. 1st Class Kelley Crane of the South Dakota National Guard represents the soldier demographic in a silent portrait representing victims of sexual violence at a press conference 13 April 2012 hosted by Working Against Violence, Inc., Rapid City, South Dakota.

As we should expect, such abuses happen primarily at the lower levels, at the young levels of leadership, though the abuses of more senior leaders of the recent past may come more quickly to mind. The culture that sets the conditions for this kind of abuse of power is deeply rooted in language. If we call a man a “stud” because of his sexual activities, the culture generally regards the man favorably. Sexual promiscuity carries fewer stigmas for the man than it does for the woman. The word “slut” is a loaded term that culture undeniably holds in a general disfavor. So, it is easy to see that part of the culture in need of change immediately stacks against women. What such language suggests is that, as women are commonly objectified by such language, a cultural attitude prevails that sets the conditions for tolerating harassment of women and even contributes to assault. So, it is no surprise that women suffer assaults much more commonly than men.

However, many men are the victims of sexual assault and harassment too, and in raw numbers, assaults on men are a significant problem within the Army. To understand this aspect of the culture, one has to dive

more deeply into power dynamics, beyond the surface issues of drunken men assaulting drugged, drunken, or vulnerable women. To understand this part of the culture, one has to examine the common denominator, and this is the issue of dignity and respect, as Army leadership often points out. The Army has to see language as a critical means for ensuring soldiers are treated with dignity, and it needs to determine how it develops tough warfighters in a climate of respect. Balancing a climate of respect with developing tough warfighters is probably the greatest problem the military has now. Developing soldierly toughness often becomes confused with demonstrating dominance and superiority through harsh or degrading treatment. We still have leaders who demean and disrespect their subordinates as a means to achieve ends they imagine are good.

However, such disrespect is part and parcel of the problem of sexual assault and harassment in the military. The relationship between the desire to objectify others and the impulses of the person doing the objectifying is an idea made famous by Jean-Paul Sartre in

his seminal psychological theory of self-deception (i.e., “bad faith”) in *Being and Nothingness*.<sup>1</sup>

His discussion goes far in explaining the psychological phenomenon behind prison rapes among same-sex populations as a matter of social dominance rather than sexual orientation. Such rapes are supreme acts of disrespect, the stripping of dignity. One can also see the same dynamic in cases of abusive hazing incidents in fraternities.

The impulse to objectify others is always the precursor of psychological violence that also leads to physical violence. There is a sexual component in this impulse, and it is therefore worth keeping in mind that the realities of SHARP are connected to the culture that we tolerate regarding leadership and stewardship in general.

Attacking someone’s dignity, showing disrespect for a subordinate through verbal or physical attacks in the name of developing soldierly toughness, is an act governed by the same impulse as sexual assault. This disrespect is at the heart of the culture that must change if we are to defeat sexual assault and harassment.

As long as leaders can degrade others verbally or physically, and get away with it, as long as we turn our backs when a superior abuses a subordinate, the conditions are set to take the abuse into the realm of overt sexual dynamics. Leaders who engage in hazing or in abusive “smoke sessions” are performing sublimated sexual acts of dominance. The battalion commander or command sergeant major who lets loose a string of obscenities meant to degrade a subordinate is performing an act that is psychologically akin to assaulting that soldier. ■

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## Note

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: a Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Citadel Press, 1956). See part three, chapter three, “Concrete Relations With

Others,” and sub-chapter II, “Second Attitude Toward Others: Indifference, Desire, Hate, Sadism.”

