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Support for Transgender Military Service from Active Duty United States Military Personnel

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Abstract

Introduction—Most transgender individuals are banned from serving in and joining the U.S. military. Historically, exclusions and limits have been placed on women, people of color, and sexual minority people seeking to serve and advance within the U.S. military. However, both history and prior research demonstrate that diversity contributes to social and institutional advancement within both U.S. and international militaries.

Methods—We used an adapted respondent-driven sampling (RDS) approach to recruit transgender and cisgender heterosexual and LGB active duty military members in a first-of-its-kind study funded by the Department of Defense. We recruited 540 active duty service members serving one of the four major branches of the U.S. military between August 2017 and March 2018. We examined data from 486 heterosexual cisgender and LGB cisgender service members to understand their support for transgender people serving in the U.S. military.

Results—Findings indicate broad support for transgender military service across all four branches of the military and military ranks, with some statistically significant differences in support emerging by gender, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity.

Discussion—Results suggest that the ban, in part, based on a belief that transgender service members degrade unit readiness, contradicts our findings of broad support for transgender service among active duty service members.

Policy Implications—Policies limiting transgender service in the U.S. military should be lifted given these data.

Keywords

Transgender Military Service; Transgender Military Support; Military; Policy; LGBT; Diversity

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Introduction

The path to U.S. military service for transgender people has been complicated in recent years. On July 1, 2016, a new policy under President Obama ended discharges of transgender military service members and allowed transgender people to join the military starting July 2017 (Downing, Conron, Herman, & Blosnich, 2018). Then, in March 2018, President Trump reversed Obama's policy, placing bans on transgender service members if they had been diagnosed with gender dysphoria or had undergone medical gender transition, including hormones and surgery (Downing et al., 2018). In April 2019, this ban went into effect despite efforts by the Democratic-controlled House of Representatives to block the implementation of the ban. This current policy debate represents a larger historical precedent of politics influencing both civilian and military social policy toward transgender people.

Transgender Military Service

To date, we lack the large-scale military and population-based studies assessing the number of transgender people currently serving in the U.S. military on active duty (Schaefer et al., 2016). A study published by the Williams Institute at UCLA using data from the National Transgender Discrimination Survey (NTDS), estimated that 15,500 transgender people were serving in the U.S. military with 8800 transgender people serving as active duty (Gates & Herman, 2014). The same study estimated that 134,300 transgender individuals are veterans or retired from the Reserves (Gates & Herman, 2014). Prior to the transgender military ban, research suggests that around 0.6% of military personnel are transgender, with transgender adults being twice as likely to serve in the armed forces compared with the general population (Downing et al., 2018). A RAND Corporation study published in 2016 estimated that as many as 6630 transgender adults are actively serving in the U.S. military (Suh, 2019; Schaefer et al., 2016). Data from the 2016 Workplace and Gender Relations Survey of Active Duty Members from the Office of People Analytics (OPA) indicated that of the 151,010 active duty members surveyed, roughly 1% identified as transgender, 1% were unsure of their gender, and another 3% of women and 5% of men preferred not to answer (Davis, Grifka, Williams, & Coffey, 2017). Given this range of estimates, data regarding the number of active-duty transgender service members remain unclear because transgender individuals were not allowed to openly serve until 2016 (Suh, 2019). Consequently, estimates likely grossly underrepresent and misrepresent the contribution of transgender service members to the U.S. military. Despite this likely underrepresentation of transgender military service prior to the ban, the U.S. military has plausibly been the largest employer of transgender people in the U.S. (Sosin, 2019). To understand the path toward fully integrating transgender service members in the U.S. military, it is helpful to examine the integration of other minority groups into the military.

Integration of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Soldiers

During World War II, a medical rationale for banning LGB people from serving in the U.S. military was based on a psychiatric view of homosexuality as a psychopathological disorder (Bérubé, 2010; Goldbach & Castro, 2016; Pruitt, 2019). However, similar to the experiences of Black and female soldiers whose military roles were severely limited during this time, military shortages demanded temporary recruitment and enlistment of LGB service

members (Burks, 2011). During the 1970s, civil rights movements tried unsuccessfully to legally integrate LGB people into the military. In 1981, military policy deemed homosexuality incompatible with military service, thereby discharging over 17,000 LGB service members throughout the 1980s (Pruitt, 2019). In an effort to integrate and protect LGB service members, the Clinton era policy, “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Pursue” (DADT), mandated that LGB service members hide their sexual orientation from all aspects of the military including their units, officers, health care providers, mental health professionals, and even clergy, as a condition to service (Burks, 2011; Suh, 2019), with any disclosure resulting in immediate separation from the military. Between 1993 and 2009, and despite assumed protections under DADT, over 13,000 “suspected” LGB service members were discharged from the U.S. military (Burks, 2011; Burrelli & Feder, 2010), underscoring the persistent stigma and discrimination toward LGB active-duty troops, as well as directly violating the “Do not Pursue” aspect of DADT. In 2011, the repeal of DADT allowed LGB military members to serve openly (Suh, 2019).

Integration of Other Minority Soldiers

Black and female representation within the U.S. military began during colonial times and civil war eras, primarily to offset shortages of White male soldiers. However, people of color and women served without the rights and protections afforded to their white male comrades. In 1948, the Women’s Armed Services Integration Act enabled women to serve in the military in a limited capacity (Kamarck, 2016). At that time, women were prevented from being assigned to aircraft or vessels engaged in combat missions, needed parental consent if they were 21 years of age or younger, and were not permitted to hold a rank above lieutenant colonel/commander. The proportion of women was limited to 2% of enlisted and 10% of officers (Kamarck, 2016). During the Vietnam War, Black/African American persons were being drafted and assigned to high-risk combat units at disproportionate rates compared with Whites (Kamarck, 2016). Black/African American military personnel accounted for 11% of the U.S. population but nearly one-quarter of all military casualties between 1961 and 1966 (Kamarck, 2016). Despite efforts toward integration, disparities in recruitment and assignment continued for minority soldiers.

In 2013, the DOD supported women on the front lines and paved their path to serve in combat roles by withdrawing the Direct Ground Combat and Assignment Rule, which had previously prohibited women from having a primary assignment to combat (Kamarck, 2016). It should be noted that although women were prevented from having a direct combat assignment, many women were assigned to combat units with “indirect” combat assignments, effectively placing them in roles in which they directly engaged in combat (Kamarck, 2016). In February 2019, a U.S. District Judge ruled that barring women from being drafted was unconstitutional (Blakemore, 2019), representing a possible shift in perception regarding women’s value within combat roles. According to the Council on Foreign Relations, data from 2016 suggest that active-duty women represent 16% of enlisted and 18% of officers and are more racially and ethnically diverse than active duty men (Reynolds & Shendruk, 2018). Data from Pew Research Center in 2015 suggests that racial and ethnic minority groups make up 40% of active-duty military personnel with Black/African American, and Hispanic/Latinx people comprising 17% and 12% of active duty

service members respectively (Parker, Cilluffo, & Stepler, 2017). Historical precedent indicates that times of peace combined with political climate can permit more discriminatory selectivity regarding diverse gender and racial/ethnic integration whereas times of war or immediate need provide opportunities for previously excluded groups to demonstrate their positive impact on mission success (Segal, Segal, & Reed, 2015). While separate, these historical precedents remain an important part of the cultural and political landscape of inclusion for minority troops in the U.S. military.

Current Transgender Ban

The current ban prohibits most transgender people from serving in the U.S. military. For others, restrictive provisions have created a limited path to either being retained in the military or joining the military. According to the DOD's Directive-type Memorandum (DTD) effective April 12, 2019, transgender individuals are banned from enlisting or commissioning if the following criteria are met: (1) "they have a history or diagnosis of gender dysphoria and have not demonstrated stability as their biological sex for a period of at least 36 consecutive months"; and "they have transitioned to their preferred gender and a licensed provider has determined that transition is medically necessary"; (2) "the applicant is not willing and not able to adhere to standards associated with their biological sex"; (3) transgender service members "have a history of cross-sex hormone therapy or sex reassignment or genital reconstruction surgery" (DOD, pp. 8–9, 2019). These restrictions demonstrate that the current ban perpetuates the stigma of transgender military troops by defining their readiness to serve within a limited understanding of gender-affirming health care. At the same time, this ban diminishes the importance of accessing a wide variety of health and mental health care services for all U.S. military personnel. Furthermore, the current ban postdates decades of science and policies supporting diversity as a mechanism for institutional and social advancement.

We sought to understand the degree to which active duty service members support transgender people serving in the U.S. military. Specifically, this study uses survey data collected from diverse cisgender heterosexual and LGB active-duty U.S. military members to understand whether they support transgender service. We were also interested in differences in support of transgender military service by the branch of service, military rank, gender identity, racial/ethnic identity, and sexual orientation. In addition, we sought to understand differences in support for transgender military service among groups that have been denied the ability to serve previously (i.e., racial/ethnic minority, women, LGB service members) compared to their White, male, heterosexual counterparts.

Methods

Participants and Procedures

We used an adapted respondent-driven sampling (RDS) approach to recruit a diverse sample of both LGBT and heterosexual/cisgender service members from the four main branches of the U.S. military: Air Force, Army, Navy, Marines Briefly, primary investigators, an Expert Advisory Panel (EAP) and study staff provided contact information for both LGBT and heterosexual/cisgender service members to act as "seeds" and to recruit through their

network contacts. When seed recruitment through EAP referrals and study staff slowed, we expanded seed recruitment by promoting the study through popular military-related blogs, newspapers, and Facebook groups. We also promoted the study on college campuses and at military-related events using flyers and palm cards and purchased advertising with newspapers and social media (e.g., Facebook) that target individuals currently serving in the military. Each strategy was accompanied by a unique referral code to monitor and track referral effectiveness and to ensure that no single group or platform yielded more than 20 eligible seeds at a time (Fisher et al., under review).

Data collection took place between August 2017 and March 2018. Potential participants who were recruited by peers were referred to a study landing webpage, which contained general information about the research project and asked participants to enter their referral code. Once a valid referral code was entered, potential participants screened for eligibility, which required that they (1) are at least 18 years of age; (2) speak English; (3) are active-duty in the Air Force, Army, Marine Corps, or Navy; and (4) are willing and able to provide consent. After screening eligible participants were then directed to a secure survey platform (Qualtrics, 2005) where they were asked to provide informed consent for study participation. The total survey lasted approximately 30–45 min. Participants were compensated \$25 for completing the survey (if off duty); those who chose to exit at the half-way point were compensated \$10. Study procedures were approved by institutional review boards at the University of Southern California and the University of California, Los Angeles. To capture support for transgender military service, we used data from heterosexual cisgender ($n = 295$) and LGB cisgender ($n = 187$) participants, excluding ($n = 58$) transgender participants.

Measures

All participants were asked the following question: *Should transgender people be allowed to serve in the military* with response options as (1) yes, (2) no, (3) unsure, and (4) decline to answer. Participants who entered not sure were combined with no; those who declined to answer were dropped from this analysis. The survey also captured sociodemographic information, including age (continuous), sex assigned at birth (male, female), sexual orientation (heterosexual or LGB), and race/ethnicity (Black, White, Hispanic, Other). Additional measures related to military service included a branch of military service (i.e., Air Force, Army, Marines, Navy) and current rank (i.e., officer vs. enlisted) and length of service (to the nearest year) were also included.

Data Analysis

We sought to understand differences in support of transgender military service using bivariate and multivariable analyses. All bivariate and multivariable logistic mixed-effect models were Bayesian with a normal prior on the intercept with mean 0 and standard deviation 10, normal priors on the slope parameters with mean 0 and standard deviation 2.5, and half- t distributed priors on the standard deviation parameters with mean 0, variance 100, and three degrees of freedom. Bayesian models were fit using the “rstan” package, the R interface to the Bayesian modeling language Stan. The bivariate models included no adjustment for covariates other than the cluster membership random effect to account for RDS sampling. For the multivariable model, we included sexual orientation, gender, age,

race, officer status, military branch, length of service, and RDS cluster membership. To use the complete set of data ($n = 486$), excluding transgender participants ($n = 58$), we used multiple imputations by chained equations via the R package “mice” as a remedy for missing data.

Results

Sample Characteristics

The study sample represented diversity in terms of demographic and military service characteristics (Table 1). Participant ages ranged from 18 to 54 years (mean age 27.6, $SD = 6.1$). Approximately 57% of the sample was white, 60% identified as heterosexual and approximately 66% identified as male. Army and Air Force members represented the majority of the sample (41% and 35% respectively) with a lower proportion being in the Navy and Marines (14% and 9% respectively). Over half of the sample identified themselves as enlisted (63%). The mean length of service was 6 years ($SD = 5.4$).

Support of Transgender Military Service by Demographic Group

Overall, 66% of participants supported transgender service. This differed by sexual orientation with 82% of LGB and 57% of heterosexual/cisgender respondents who supported transgender military service (Table 1). We calculated the proportion within each demographic group (branch of military, rank, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and gender) regarding support for transgender military service and found no statistically significant differences between the four branches of the military.

Findings indicate greater heterogeneity in support for transgender service between heterosexual, LGB, and male- and female-identified service members. LGB and women service members reported the greatest support (81% and 75% respectively) while heterosexual and male service members indicated the lowest support of transgender service (56% and 62% respectively). Among racial/ethnic groups, Black and Latinx service members reported the highest support for transgender people serving (69% and 75% respectively) while 64% of white service members indicated their support. Despite some differences within these groups, the majority of participants in our sample (66%) indicated that they supported transgender people serving in the armed forces.

Bivariate Results

In a bivariate scope with no covariate adjustment (apart from RDS clustering), no significant differences were found at the 0.05 level for support of transgender service by age, race, military branch, officer status, and length of service (Table 2). There were two statistically significant differences related to gender and sexual orientation. Specifically, the odds of cisgender women in the military supporting transgender service were about 2.1 times that of the odds for cisgender men (95% CI 1.35, 3.40). The odds of cisgender LGB service members supporting transgender service were about 3.4 times that of the odds for cisgender heterosexual service members (95% CI 2.15, 5.57).

Multivariate Results

The odds of cisgender women in the military supporting transgender service was about 2.0 times that of the odds for cisgender men when adjusting for sexual orientation, age, race, military branch, officer status, and length of service (95% CI 1.25, 3.39) (Table 3). The odds of cisgender LGB service members supporting transgender service was about 4.2 times that of the odds for cisgender heterosexual service members (95% CI 2.15, 5.57). Unlike in the bivariate models, the odds of Black and Hispanic service members supporting transgender service was 2.3 and 2.5 times higher than their white counterparts when adjusting for gender, military branch, officer status, and length of service respectively (95% CI 1.22, 4.22; 1.26, 5.17). Similar to the bivariate models, we found no statistically significant differences regarding support of transgender service by military branch, officer status, age, and length of service.

Discussion

This analysis sought to understand active duty service members' support for transgender people serving in the U.S. military. Findings suggest broad support for transgender military service across all branches of service and military ranks, with some statistically significant differences in support emerging by gender, sexual orientation, and race/ethnicity. Specifically, those who are part of traditionally privileged identity groups (i.e., White, male, heterosexual) were less supportive of transgender military service compared to their cisgender peers in traditionally less privileged social categories (i.e., racial/ethnic minority, female, LGB). These findings are relevant to military policy and programs that support the acceptance and integration of minority groups in military service.

Since the 1940s and under then-President Harry Truman, American military social policy began integrating and advancing service and commissioning pathways for people of color, women, and (decades later) LGB people into a historically White, heterosexual male-dominated military institution (Kamarck, 2016). Service members whose identities fall outside being white, heterosexual, and cisgender male have historically gone to great lengths to honorably serve in the U.S. military (Burks, 2011; Kamarck, 2016; Segal et al., 2015). These service members often experienced the same stressors as white cisgender heterosexual male service members—leaving home, rigorous boot camp, multiple deployments, and exposure to war—while simultaneously facing additive stress of gender, race, and LGB-based discrimination, stigma, harassment and lack of political and institutional protections and resources (Alford & Lee, 2016). Our findings suggest that those from historically underrepresented groups in military service (racial/ethnic minorities, women, LGB people) understand and empathize with transgender people's desire and capacity to serve in the U.S. military. However, not all historically stigmatized service members reported that they supported transgender military service. Notably, nearly 1 in 5 active duty LGB military service members surveyed reported that they did not support transgender military service. This demonstrates that other important factors are likely contributing to LGB military service members' support for transgender individuals serving in the U.S. military. For example, previous research has found that traditional conservative attitudes and not military-specific exposure are related to beliefs about women in military roles, including combat

(Laurence, Milavec, Rohall, Ender, & Matthews, 2016). More research is needed to determine the factors beyond sexual orientation, gender, and race/ethnicity (such as religiosity, political affiliation) that contribute to perceptions of support for transgender military service.

Arguments against integration have been historically disproven through research examining the integration of women, racial/ethnic minorities and LGB persons into the U.S. military. For example, a study published just over 1 year after the repeal of DADT, found no overall negative impact from the repeal on morale, retention, unit cohesion, or readiness to serve, and instead found that the repeal enhanced the military's capacity to pursue its missions (Belkin et al., 2013). Due to the dearth of U.S. military studies on the contribution of transgender military service members, data have yet to connect transgender military service to U.S. military effectiveness or unit cohesion. Recent data from the RAND Corporation's National Defense Research Institute uncovered important implications from indepth analysis of Israel, Australia, the UK, and Canada's military-related inclusion of transgender military members. While limited, studies on the impact of integrating transgender service members have stemmed from Canada (Schaefer et al., 2016). Extensive reviews of defense reports and memos, as well as commander interviews, revealed that transgender inclusion led to more capacity and readiness to address a greater variety of challenges (Okros & Scott, 2015; Schaefer et al., 2016). These data underscore the importance of transgender service and diversity, in general, to all aspects of military success.

While our findings provide important evidence contributing to debates regarding the potential contributions of transgender soldiers to the military, our study is not without limitations. While we did gather data regarding support, our data do not provide narrative information regarding the benefits of transgender service. Therefore, our data do not demonstrate *why* participants expressed support. Further qualitative and quantitative data on this topic is warranted to elucidate motivations behind support for transgender service. Additionally, given LGB service members' advocacy for inclusion and the use of non-discriminatory practices within the U.S. military, leading to the repeal of DADT, research exploring factors contributing to LGB participants who do not support the transgender military is critical to our understanding of factors contributing to perceptions of transgender military service. The mean age of our sample was 26, suggesting that our sample is younger than that of the broader military population whose average age for military officers was 34.5 and the average age for enlisted members was 27 (Parker et al., 2017). We also lack robust representation from the Marines and Navy, suggesting that our results may not adequately represent the views of these two branches of the military.

Conclusions

This paper contributes to the on-going dialog about the benefits of diversity within the military by describing broad support for transgender service among active-duty military service members. It is likely that many of the cisgender service members in our sample were surveyed during a time when they were serving alongside their more open active-duty transgender comrades. The present study represents one of the first large scale studies of active duty service members' perceptions of support regarding transgender people serving in

the military. Our findings demonstrate broad support and provide evidence suggesting that support for the inclusion of transgender service members as reported by cisgender active duty service members themselves, indicates the value and positive contribution of transgender military service members within the U.S. military.

Recent military policies banning transgender military service members and transgender Americans primed to serve in the U.S. military may rely on our data and historical examples demonstrating the importance of civil and institutional diversity for innovation and continued technological, operational, and transnational advancement and growth (Segal et al., 2015). While the policy does not eliminate social segregation and discrimination related to race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual identity, it serves as a legal safety net of protection and begins to improve the climate of social acceptance. Transgender military service was widely supported among active-duty heterosexual and LGB cisgender military personnel, indicating that from the perspective of service members themselves, the ban should be lifted.

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Table 1

Descriptive characteristics of the study sample by those who support vs. do not support transgender military service ($N = 486$)

	Full data ($n = 486$)*	Support ($n = 322$)	Does not support ($n = 146$)	Missing ($n = 18$)
Gender				
Male	324 (0.667)	201 (0.624)	113 (0.774)	10 (0.556)
Female	162 (0.333)	121 (0.376)	33 (0.226)	8 (0.444)
Sexual orientation				
Heterosexual	295 (0.607)	169 (0.525)	114 (0.781)	12 (0.667)
LGB	187 (0.385)	153 (0.475)	32 (0.219)	2 (0.111)
Missing	4 (0.008)	0 (0.000)	0 (0.000)	4 (0.222)
Race				
White	277 (0.570)	176 (0.547)	92 (0.630)	9 (0.500)
Black	86 (0.177)	60 (0.186)	22 (0.151)	4 (0.222)
Hispanic	69 (0.142)	52 (0.161)	15 (0.103)	2 (0.111)
Other	51 (0.105)	32 (0.099)	16 (0.110)	3 (0.167)
Missing	3 (0.006)	2 (0.006)	1 (0.007)	0 (0.000)
Military branch				
Army	201 (0.414)	132 (0.410)	62 (0.425)	7 (0.389)
Air Force	171 (0.352)	114 (0.354)	53 (0.363)	4 (0.222)
Marines	45 (0.093)	31 (0.096)	12 (0.082)	2 (0.111)
Navy	69 (0.142)	45 (0.140)	19 (0.130)	5 (0.278)
Officer status				
Officer	178 (0.366)	199 (0.618)	95 (0.651)	14 (0.778)
Enlisted	308 (0.634)	123 (0.382)	51 (0.349)	4 (0.222)
Age	27.6 (SD = 6.1) (median = 26)	27.8 (SD = 6.0) (median = 26)	27.3 (SD = 6.5) (median = 26)	
Length of service	6.0 (SD = 5.4) (median = 4.0)	6.1 (SD = 5.2) (median = 5.0)	6.0 (SD = 6.0) (median = 4.0)	

* excludes $n = 58$ trans

Table 2

Bivariate Bayesian Logistic Regression predicting the odds of supporting transgender military service by gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and military characteristics ($N = 486$)

	Estimate	95% CI
Gender (female)	2.125	(1.354, 3.399)
Sexual orientation (LGB)	3.425	(2.151, 5.572)
Race/ethnicity (ref: White)		
Black	1.465	(0.848, 2.594)
Hispanic	1.855	(0.990, 3.604)
Other	1.066	(0.558, 2.091)
Military branch (ref: Army)		
Air Force	1.002	(0.616, 1.626)
Marines	1.259	(0.599, 2.764)
Navy	1.097	(0.578, 2.102)
Officer status (Officer)	1.182	(0.773, 1.830)
Age	1.015	(0.981, 1.051)
Length of service	1.003	(0.966, 1.043)

Table 3

Multivariate Bayesian Logistic Regression with multiple imputation predicting the odds of supporting transgender military service by gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, and military characteristics ($N= 486$)

	Estimate	95% CI
Gender (female)	2.039	(1.250, 3.387)
Sexual orientation (LGB)	4.204	(2.519, 7.250)
Race/ethnicity (ref: White)		
Black	2.25	(1.219, 4.219)
Hispanic	2.502	(1.260, 5.165)
Other	1.296	(0.619, 2.764)
Military branch (ref: Army)		
Air Force	1.367	(0.786, 2.371)
Marines	1.971	(0.863, 4.647)
Navy	1.226	(0.606, 2.507)
Officer status (Officer)	1.011	(0.583, 1.756)
Age	1.049	(0.975, 1.130)
Length of service	0.939	(0.867, 1.015)