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Acceptance matters: Disengagement and attrition among LGBT personnel in the U.S. military

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: The U.S. military has undergone profound changes in its policies toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) service members (SMs) over the past decade. Although emerging evidence indicates that some LGBT SMs perceive their co-workers as supportive, a sizable group report continued victimization, harassment, and fear of disclosing their LGBT identity. Because employee perception of cohesion and belonging affects retention in the workplace, such discrimination is likely to affect retention of LGBT military personnel. **Methods:** Survey data come from a study funded by the U.S. Department of Defense (2017-2018) and completed by 544 active-duty SMs (non-LGBT n = 296; LGBT n = 248). Multinomial logistic regressions were used to examine military career intentions among SMs according to socio-demographics, perceived acceptance, and unit climate. **Results:** One in 3 transgender SMs plan to leave the military upon completion of their service commitment, compared with 1 in 5 cisgender LGB SMs and 1 in 8 non-LGBT SMs. LGBT SMs were twice as likely as non-LGBT SMs to be undecided about their military career path after controlling for confounding variables. Lower perceived LGBT acceptance was associated with a higher risk of attrition among LGBT SMs. Lower perceived unit cohesion was associated with attrition risk for all SMs. **Discussion:** These findings suggest that, although some LGBT SMs may feel accepted, the U.S. military could do more to improve its climate of acceptance to prevent attrition, especially for transgender SMs. Taking measures to prioritize unit cohesion would improve retention of qualified LGBT and non-LGBT SMs.

Key words: attrition, bisexual, gay, lesbian, LGBT, LGBT inclusive policies, military, military health, retention, sexual and gender minorities, transgender, unit cohesion, U.S.

RÉSUMÉ

Introduction : L'armée américaine a apporté de profonds changements à ses politiques envers les membres du service (MS) lesbiennes, gays, bisexuels et transgenres (LGBT) depuis dix ans. Selon des données émergentes, certains MS LGBT perçoivent pouvoir compter sur le soutien de leurs collègues, mais un nombre considérable de MS déclarent continuer d'être victimisés et harcelés et craindre de divulguer leur identité LGBT. Puisque la perception de cohésion et d'appartenance influe sur la rétention de la main-d'œuvre, une telle discrimination est susceptible d'avoir des répercussions sur la rétention du personnel militaire LGBT. **Méthodologie :** Les données des sondages proviennent de l'étude financée par le ministère de la Défense des États-Unis (2017-2018) à laquelle ont participé 544 MS en service actif (non LGBT n = 296; LGBT n = 248). Les chercheurs ont utilisé la régression logistique multinomiale pour examiner l'intention des MS de poursuivre une carrière de militaire en fonction des profils sociodémographiques, la perception d'acceptation et le climat de l'unité. **Résultats :** Un MS transgenre sur trois prévoit de quitter l'armée à la fin de son engagement de service, par rapport à un cisgenre LGB sur cinq et un MS non LGBT sur huit. Les MS LGBT étaient deux fois plus susceptibles que les MS non LGBT de ne pas encore savoir s'ils resteraient dans l'armée après pondération. La perception d'une acceptation plus faible des LGBT était associée à un risque d'attrition plus élevé chez les MS LGBT. La perception d'une cohésion plus faible de l'unité était associée à un risque d'attrition pour tous les MS. **Discussion :** D'après ces observations, certains MS LGBT peuvent se sentir acceptés, mais l'armée américaine pourrait en faire davantage pour améliorer son climat d'acceptation et

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ainsi prévenir l'attrition, particulièrement chez les MS transgenres. L'adoption de mesures pour prioriser la cohésion de l'unité contribuerait à améliorer la rétention de MS LGBT et non LGBT qualifiés.

Mots-clés : attrition, bisexuel, cohésion de l'unité, États-Unis, gay, lesbienne, LGBT, militaire, minorités sexuelles et de genre, politiques d'inclusion des LGBT, santé des militaires, rétention, transgenre

LAY SUMMARY

The U.S. military has undergone several changes in policies toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) service members over the past decade. Some LGBT service members report continued victimization and fear of disclosing their LGBT identity, which can affect retention of LGBT personnel serving in the military. However, there is little research on this population. This study uses data from a survey funded by the U.S. Department of Defense (2017-2018) and completed by 544 active-duty service members (296 non-LGBT and 248 LGBT) to better understand the career intentions of LGBT service members. Of transgender service members, 33% plan to leave the military upon completion of their commitment, compared with 20% of cisgender LGB and 13% of non-LGBT service members. LGBT service members were twice as likely as non-LGBT service members to be undecided as to their military career path. Lower perceived acceptance of LGBT service members in the workplace was associated with a higher risk of leaving among LGBT service members. Lower perceived unit cohesion was associated with attrition risk for all members, regardless of LGBT status. These findings suggest that the U.S. military can do more to improve its climate of LGBT acceptance to prevent attrition.

INTRODUCTION

Employee perception of safety, cohesion, belonging, and acceptance in the workplace is associated with job satisfaction, mental health outcomes, organizational commitment, and retention.¹⁻³ Phenomenological research demonstrates that feeling included, accepted, and invited to be part of the group at work positively affects employees' sense of belonging.⁴ Conversely, employees' experiences of social exclusion — behaviours that seek to avoid, ignore, or reject an organizational member — can be harmful and negatively affect employees' sense of acceptance, self-esteem, health outcomes, and turnover.⁵

For lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) employees, finding a sense of belonging in the workplace can be challenging. Research has found that concealment of stigmatized identities in the workplace can be costly in terms of health, collective self-esteem, job satisfaction, and commitment.⁶ A meta-analysis of workplace contextual supports for LGBT employees found that supportive work relationships had the greatest effect on LGBT employee attitudes and reduced psychological strain, and formal policies about LGBT staff had the least effect.⁷ This research also found that a supportive LGBT climate had the most positive effect on LGBT employees' likelihood of disclosure and decreased perceived discrimination at work, which ultimately affect organizational commitment.⁷ Hence, formal LGBT policies without other workplace LGBT supports may only address issues of diversity without affecting issues of inclusion.²

Militaries have long been concerned with building and maintaining a strong sense of unit cohe-

sion, which has been defined as having trust in one's immediate community, a visceral sense of mutual care, a pattern of working together to accomplish the mission, and supporting one another as essential members of the team.^{8,9} Research on both civilian and military career intent suggests that psychological climate (defined as how beneficial or detrimental a work environment is deemed to be to an individual's well-being) may affect one's commitment to one's work and employee turnover.¹⁰ Langkamer and Ervin found that antagonistic or discriminatory environments contribute significantly to army captains' intentions to leave service before retirement.¹¹ Other military research has found that service members (SMs) who perceived lesser unit cohesion and negative impressions of leadership were more likely to report their intentions to leave service.¹² In addition, racial and gender discrimination or harassment, combined with poor leadership responses, have been found to affect intentions to leave service of those in minority groups.^{13,14}

In the United States, SMs are typically contracted for four years of active service, but they can extend their contracts after their active-duty time is complete. On average, over the past several years, approximately 180,000 (14%) members have separated from the service per year.¹⁵ A majority of SMs across branches separate voluntarily or retire from service; involuntary separations can involve legal and standards-of-conduct issues, poor performance, non-selection for promotion, death, and medical disability.¹⁵

LGBT service in the U.S. military

Difficulties finding a sense of belonging may be especially apparent for those employed by institutions with historically anti-LGBT policies, such as the U.S. military. U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) policies affecting the approximately 75,000 active-duty LGBT SMs have changed considerably over the past 30 years.¹⁶ They have evolved from overt exclusion of LGBT personnel to the 1993 Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT) policy that required LGB SMs to conceal their identities under threat of expulsion from the military.¹⁷ Under DADT, at least 13,000 SMs were discharged for suspected homosexuality or bisexuality and so-called credible information confirming the member's sexual minority identity or homosexual behaviour.¹⁸ The DoD repealed DADT in 2010, allowing for free expression of sexual minority identity and sexual behaviour without threat of unwanted separation from the military.

In 2016, the DoD implemented a policy of openness to transgender service, assuming fitness-for-duty standards were met. This policy was rescinded shortly thereafter in 2017, mandating that personnel serve as their gender assigned at birth.¹⁹ The DoD again amended the policy by allowing open transgender service as of this writing.²⁰ It is therefore unsurprising that LGBT SMs of the U.S. military have reported barriers and fears of outness in service.²¹ For example, a recent qualitative analysis of LGBT outness in the military found that nearly half of LGBT SMs interviewed were cautious in their identity disclosure because of feared misalignment between the accepting policy toward LGB personnel and the climate in which they work.¹³ Half of respondents reported vigilance for cues of LGBT acceptance or rejection from other military members before disclosure.¹³ In addition to or as a result of these policies, LGBT SMs are found to be at an elevated risk of sexual and stalking victimization and perceive lower acceptance of LGBT and other minority groups in service.^{22,23} Ultimately, this lack of perceived belonging among LGBT SMs may affect social and task cohesion within the ranks, negatively affect military performance, and result in negative impacts on health and career outcomes.²⁴⁻²⁶

Theoretical approach

Drawing on social identity theory, this article connects LGBT SMs' self-categorization and perceived group membership with inter-group relationships driven by

unit cohesion and organizational commitment.²⁷⁻³¹ Social identity theory refers to individuals' definition of sense of self and their place in society on the basis of group memberships and inter-group comparisons. Individuals self-categorize in terms of social groups and, depending on the context, will behave according to how a group member is expected to act by adopting group values, behaviours, and characteristics.²⁷ Individuals gain and maintain self-esteem and status via the desire to be seen as a member of the in-group versus the out-group. In-group and out-group membership is typically based on multiple characteristics, including demographic factors such as race, gender, religious beliefs, political affiliations, and education level. Membership influences an individual's social identity.³²

Social identity theory highlights the foundation for in-group membership among SMs because of the requirements to be psychologically or socially interdependent on one another to meet specific needs, achieve goals, or validate attitudes and values.²⁷ In-group status for SMs is also necessary to complete tasks, accomplish missions, and achieve promotion. Military identity allows for cohesion to occur and is grounded in in-group acceptance. The known barriers (e.g., stigma, being seen as weak) and facilitators (e.g., confidentiality) are clear indicators of wanting to stay in the in-group and not cause any reason to be viewed in a negative way or perceived as a member of the out-group.³³ The current work used social identity theory to examine LGBT SMs' self-categorization and belongingness in regard to in-group membership while serving in the military and specific inter-group relationships that are driven by unit cohesion and organizational commitment.^{8,27,28,30,31}

Aims

Overall, research into LGBT workers and workplace-related issues has been lacking, with research among the U.S. military even further behind as a result of historical exclusionary policies.^{34,35} The aim of this study was to provide a first-of-its-kind exploratory look into the military career intentions (defined as one's current longitudinal plan related to remaining on active-duty status) of LGBT SMs compared with non-LGBT SMs, identify socio-demographic and military factors associated with military career intentions of LGBT SMs (i.e., plan to leave vs. undecided vs. plan to stay), and examine how perceived unit climate and minority acceptance affects the military career intentions of LGBT SMs.

METHODS

Participants

This study uses data collected from 544 participants between August 2017 and March 2018 as part of the Military Acceptance Project, which is designed to assess acceptance, integration, and health among LGBT SMs compared with non-LGBT SMs.³⁶ Active-duty SMs in the U.S. Air Force, Marines, Army, or Navy aged older than 18 years who spoke English were eligible for participation. Participants received a US\$25 electronic gift card as well as a US\$10 gift card for eligible referrals who also completed the survey. To recruit sufficient LGBT SMs to power analyses, an expert advisory panel was formed using military and LGBT networks known to the research team. Respondent-driven and digitally purposive sampling methods were used to reach both LGBT and non-LGBT SMs. To reach non-LGBT personnel and LGBT personnel who may not be engaged with sexual or gender minority military communities, the research team advertised the study on general military forums, such as popular military-related blogs, newspapers, and Facebook groups. Further information on study design, recruitment, and procedures can be found in McNamara et al. and Schuyler and Klemmer.^{21,22,37} The Human Protection Office of the U.S. military and the institutional review boards at the University of Southern California and University of California, Los Angeles, granted ethical approval for this study.

Outcome measure

The authors assessed career intention with a single question asking respondents, “What best describes your current active-duty career intentions?” Response options were categorized into leave (definitely/probably leave on completion of current obligation), undecided, and stay (definitely/probably stay beyond present obligation, but not until retirement, definitely/probably stay until retirement).

Sexual orientation and gender identity

Respondents were categorized as LGBT or non-LGBT on the basis of self-reported items regarding sexual identity (heterosexual or straight, gay or lesbian, bisexual, sexual orientation not listed here — please specify), gender identity (male, female, transgender male or trans man, transgender female or trans woman, genderqueer or gender non-conforming, other), and sex assigned at birth (male or female). Participants reporting a hetero-

sexual identity and a gender identity matching their sex assigned at birth were grouped as non-LGBT if they did not self-identify as LGB. Those who reported a different gender identity from that of their sex assigned at birth were categorized as transgender. Of 544 participants, 248 were identified as LGB, transgender, or LBGT.

Perceived acceptance and unit cohesion

Unit cohesion was measured using Bartone et al.’s four-item adaptation of the 20-item Platoon Cohesion Index by Siebold and Kelly, which had high internal consistency in this study (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.95$).^{9,38} The items included the following prompts: “Members of my unit have trust in each other,” “Members of my unit care for each other,” “Members of my unit work well together to get the job done,” and “Members of my unit support each other as a team,” with Likert-scale response options: 1 (not at all true), 2 (a little true), 3 (moderately true), 4 (mostly true), and 5 (completely true). Scores on individual items were summed to create a single variable with a total range between 4 and 20, with a higher score indicating greater unit cohesion.

Perceptions of LGBT inclusion in the workplace were measured using the 20-item LGBT Climate Inventory, which had high internal consistency in this study (Cronbach’s $\alpha = 0.99$).³⁹ The instructions state: “Please rate the following items according to how well they describe the atmosphere for LGBT employees in your workplace,” with five response options: 1 (doesn’t describe at all), 2 (describes somewhat/a little), 3 (describes pretty well), and 4 (describes extremely well). Examples of items include “LGBT employees are treated with respect” and “LGBT employees must be secretive.” A subset of eight items are reverse scored; scores on individual items were summed to create a single variable with a range of 20 to 80, with higher scores indicating greater LGBT inclusion.

Socio-demographic and military characteristics

Respondents provided information on age (years), ethnicity (white, Black or African American, Latino or Hispanic, Native American or Alaskan Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, multiracial, or other; coded as white or non-white for analysis), partnership status (single, divorced, or separated vs. married or domestic partnership), and education (some college or below vs. bachelor’s degree or above). Information was also collected on SM rank, based on current pay grade (E-1 to O-6), service branch, years of service, and number of deployments.

Other publications from the broader research project describe collection of these items in detail.^{21,22,40}

Analyses

Data cleaning and analyses were completed using Stata version 15.1.⁴¹ Analyses included χ^2 tests to estimate percentages and identify differences between groups (sexual orientation, gender, age, race, partnership status, education level, rank, branch of service, years of service, and deployment history) for further exploration in regression analyses and multinomial logistic regressions to calculate relative risk ratios and adjusted R^2 . While assessing for missingness in the data, the LGBT Climate Inventory was found to have 8% missingness; multiple imputation was used to impute mean scores for observations missing this measure.⁴² χ^2 analyses using Fisher's Exact Test were used to identify significant differences between sub-groups that were later combined for regressions (i.e., transgender compared with non-transgender and non-LGBT). Because of small cell sizes in some sub-groups of transgender SMs ($n < 10$), it was necessary to combine data on LGB and transgender SMs in regressions to maintain statistical power.

Using a stepwise approach, socio-demographic and military-related factors were assessed for relationship to military career intent, with unit climate factors added to the final model using χ^2 tests and unadjusted multinomial regression models.⁴³ Variables associated with the outcome variable at a significance level of $p < 0.25$ in regression models were included in model 1 (significant socio-demographic and military factors — age, race, partnership status, length of service, and deployment) and model 2 (significant socio-demographic and military factors plus unit cohesion and LGBT workplace climate).⁴³ Because the variables of gender (cisgender male vs. cisgender female), rank (enlisted vs. officer), education level (some college or lower vs. bachelor's degree or higher), and branch of service (air force vs. army vs. Marine Corps vs. navy) were not found to be significantly associated with career intent in χ^2 or binomial regression analyses, these variables were not included in the adjusted models.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics for the sample's socio-demographic and military-related factors are presented by LGBT and non-LGBT groups (Table 1). χ^2 tests of independence found that sexual orientation and gender identity (LGBT vs. non-LGBT but not cisgender male vs.

cisgender female), age, race, partnership status, length of service, and deployment history were associated with SMs' military career plans (Table 2). *T*-tests found that transgender SMs perceived significantly lower LGBT acceptance in the workplace (mean 53.40, 95% CI, 50.62-56.17) than non-LGBT SMs (mean 58.15, 95% CI, 57.02-59.28). No significant difference was found between cisgender LGB (mean 57.39, 95% CI, 55.76-59.02) and non-LGBT SMs in perception of LGBT workplace acceptance. *T*-tests also found that transgender SMs perceive significantly lower unit cohesion (mean 14.21, 95% CI, 13.32-15.09) than cisgender LGB and non-LGBT SMs (mean 15.78, 95% CI, 15.29-16.26, and mean 17.15, 95% CI, 16.79-17.51, respectively). Cisgender LGB SMs reported significantly lower unit cohesion than non-LGBT SMs.

In the adjusted final regression models, factors associated with higher risk for planning to leave the military compared with planning to stay were having fewer years of service, having never deployed, and perceiving lower unit cohesion (Table 3). Factors associated with uncertainty in military career intent compared with planning to stay were LGBT identity, being non-white, having served for fewer years, having never deployed, perceiving poorer workplace climate for LGBT SMs, and lower unit cohesion (Table 3).

DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study have practical relevance to the U.S. military. According to the job turnover model, if an employee's dissatisfaction with a job is strong enough, and other jobs are accessible, the employee will quit.⁴⁴ As dissatisfaction and a sense of out-group identity mount, ruminations about leaving, rationalizing the decision to quit, evaluating job alternatives, increased absences and lateness, work withdrawal, and task avoidance are known to increase.⁴⁴ In a military environment in which SMs are contracted to work for a designated time frame, these problematic withdrawal cognitions and behaviours may span months or even years.

Previous research on this community has found that some LGBT SMs, despite the repeal of DADT and the short-lived initial repeal of the transgender ban, continue to fear negative career repercussions as a result of LGBT disclosure to military colleagues, commanders, medical providers, counsellors, and chaplains.^{21,37,45} These findings align with this study's results, because this community noted overall lower unit cohe-

Table 1. Demographics and military-related variables of the sample: LGBT and non-LGBT service members

Socio-demographic variables	No. (%) [*]		
	LGBT sample (n = 248)	Non-LGBT sample (n = 296)	Total sample (N = 544)
Gender identity			
Cisgender			
Male	116 (47)	208 (70)	324 (67)
Female	74 (30)	88 (30)	162 (33)
Total	190 (39)	296 (61)	486 (90)
Transgender			
Trans male	32 (13)	0 (0)	32 (55)
Trans female	26 (10)	0 (0)	26 (45)
Total	58 (100)	0 (0)	58 (11)
Sexual orientation			
Gay male	113 (46)	0 (0)	113 (21)
Bisexual male	19 (8)	0 (0)	19 (3)
Lesbian female	61 (25)	0 (0)	61 (11)
Bisexual female	35 (14)	0 (0)	35 (6)
Heterosexual or straight	20 (8)	296 (100)	316 (58)
Age, years			
Avg. (range, min.-max.)	29 (18-54)	27 (19-53)	28 (18-54)
Mean (SD)	28.99 (6.49)	26.66 (5.59)	27.72 (6.12)
Race-ethnicity			
White or Caucasian	164 (66)	152 (52)	316 (58)
Latino or Hispanic	33 (13)	40 (14)	73 (13)
Black or African American	20 (8)	71 (24)	91 (17)
Other	30 (12)	31 (11)	61 (11)
Partnership status			
Single, divorced, separated	115 (51)	143 (51)	258 (51)
Married or domestic partnership	111 (49)	136 (49)	247 (49)
Education			
Some college or lower	102 (45)	159 (57)	261 (51)
Bachelor's degree or higher	127 (55)	121 (43)	248 (49)
Rank			
Enlisted			
E1-E4	70 (28)	152 (51)	222 (41)
E5-E9	78 (31)	59 (20)	137 (25)
Total	148 (60)	211 (71)	359 (66)
Officer			
O1-O3	78 (31)	73 (25)	151 (28)
O4-O6	22 (9)	12 (4)	34 (6)
Total	100 (40)	85 (29)	185 (34)
Branch			
Air force	71 (29)	111 (38)	182 (33)
Army	105 (42)	121 (41)	226 (42)
Marine Corps	22 (9)	30 (10)	52 (10)
Navy	50 (20)	34 (11)	84 (15)
Years of service, avg. (SD)	7.48 (5.66)	5.14 (4.94)	6.19 (40)
Deployment history			
None	85 (38)	124 (45)	209 (42)
≥1	140 (62)	153 (55)	293 (58)

Note: In the case of missing data, sub-totals by variable will not be equal to the sub-group total. Percentages may not total 100 because of rounding.

* Unless otherwise indicated.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics and χ^2 analyses of military career intentions by socio-demographics and military-related factors

Socio-demographic variables	n (%)			χ^2	df
	Leave (n = 95)	Undecided (n = 88)	Stay (n = 327)		
Sexual orientation and gender identity				11.01*	4
Transgender	17 (29)	8 (14)	33 (57)		
Cisgender LGB	36 (20)	38 (21)	103 (58)		
Non-LGBT	42 (15)	42 (15)	191 (69)		
Gender (cisgender only)				2.30	2
Cis women	29 (20)	28 (20)	86 (60)		
Cis men	49 (16)	52 (17)	208 (67)		
Age, y				25.22*	4
18-25	49 (23)	50 (23)	115 (54)		
26-35	41 (17)	35 (15)	160 (68)		
>36	5 (8)	3 (5)	52 (87)		
Race-ethnicity				6.81*	2
White	58 (19)	41 (14)	202 (67)		
Non-white	37 (18)	47 (22)	125 (60)		
Partnership status				14.51*	2
Single, divorced, or separated	54 (22)	53 (21)	144 (57)		
Married or domestic partnership	35 (14)	29 (12)	178 (74)		
Education				0.81	2
Some college or lower	48 (19)	45 (18)	159 (63)		
Bachelor's degree or higher	42 (17)	39 (16)	164 (67)		
Length of service, years				42.46*	4
0-4	59 (24)	55 (22)	131 (53)		
5-9	26 (16)	26 (16)	109 (68)		
10+	5 (5)	3 (3)	83 (91)		
Rank				0.01	2
Enlisted	61 (19)	56 (17)	208 (64)		
Officer	34 (18)	32 (17)	119 (64)		
Branch				5.95	6
Air force	41 (23)	28 (15)	112 (62)		
Army	35 (18)	38 (20)	120 (62)		
Marine Corps	6 (12)	10 (19)	36 (69)		
Navy	13 (15)	12 (14)	59 (70)		
Deployment history				43.49*	2
None	56 (28)	47 (24)	96 (48)		
≥1	33 (11)	34 (12)	224 (77)		

Note: Fisher's exact χ^2 analyses were used to account for small cell sizes. Percentages are of row totals. Non-white race = Black or African American, Latino or Hispanic, Native American or Alaskan Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, Multiracial, or other.

df = degrees of freedom.

* $p < 0.05$.

sion and LGBT unit acceptance. Research has found that higher perceived acceptance of one's LGB identity in the unit was associated with a decrease in posttraumatic stress, anxiety, and depression symptomatology.⁴⁶

Moreover, Schuyler et al. and Klemmer et al. found that LGBT SMs are at heightened risk for sexual harassment, assault, and stalking, and one study found that LGBT victimization was associated with elevated mental and

Table 3. Relative risk ratios of multinomial logistic regression analyses: Military career intentions by socio-demographic, military, and unit

Socio-demographic variables	Plan to leave vs. plan to stay		Undecided vs. plan to stay		Adjusted results with inclusion of unit climate measures	
	Unadjusted	Adjusted	Unadjusted	Adjusted	Plan to leave vs. plan to stay	Undecided vs. plan to stay
Sexual orientation and gender identity						
LGBT (vs. non-LGBT)	1.77* (1.12-2.81)	2.34† (1.38-3.97)	1.54 (0.96-2.47)	2.68‡ (1.51-4.73)	1.68 (0.95-2.94)	2.13† (1.18-3.86)
Age						
Average, y	0.93‡ (0.89-0.97)	1.06 (0.98-1.13)	0.91‡ (0.86-0.95)	1.07 (0.99-1.15)	1.07 (0.99-1.15)	1.09 (1.01-1.17)
Race						
Non-white (vs. white)	1.03 (0.65-1.65)	1.15 (0.67-1.95)	1.85† (1.15-2.98)	2.28† (1.32-3.95)	0.89 (0.51-1.58)	1.93* (1.03-3.13)
Partnership status						
Non-partnered (vs. partnered)	1.91† (1.18-3.08)	1.51 (0.89-2.54)	2.26† (1.37-3.74)	1.70 (0.96-2.99)	1.41 (0.81-2.44)	1.79 (0.83-2.59)
Length of service						
Average, y	0.87‡ (0.81-0.93)	0.85† (0.77-0.94)	0.81‡ (0.75-0.88)	0.77‡ (0.68-0.87)	0.88‡ (0.81-0.95)	0.82‡ (0.75-0.91)
Deployment history						
None (vs. ≥1)	3.96‡ (2.42-6.48)	2.64‡ (1.53-4.57)	3.23‡ (1.95- 5.33)	1.98* (1.12-3.50)	2.54† (1.40-4.59)	2.08* (1.15-3.77)
Pseudo- R^2					12% ($p < 0.001$)	
Workplace climate for LGBT service members					0.97 (0.95-1.00)	
Unit cohesion					0.80‡ (0.73-0.87)	
Pseudo- R^2					17% ($p < 0.001$)	

Note: Non-white race = Black or African American, Latino or Hispanic, Native American or Alaskan Native, Asian or Pacific Islander, multiracial, or other, LGBT = lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender.

* $p < 0.05$; † $p < 0.01$; ‡ $p < 0.001$.

physical health symptoms and with accessing mental health treatment.^{22,47}

The current study's findings suggest that continued anti-LGBT sentiment in the U.S. military may affect LGBT SMs' perceptions of inclusiveness. This group may experience a legacy of the DADT policy, pushing LGBT SMs to reconsider and, at times, opt out of a longer military career. In addition to these impacts, SMs themselves can experience distress when they cognitively and behaviourally withdraw from their military career. The military-to-civilian transition is known to be associated with stressors in the realms of employment, financial stability, health, and community

integration and stress to the spouse and family.⁴⁸⁻⁵⁰ Given the tenets of social identity theory, it follows that, given a degree of agency over one's career path, employees would heavily weigh their daily job dissatisfaction or satisfaction and perceived in-group or out-group status against a potentially tumultuous military-to-civilian transition. Further research — such as mixed-methods studies exploring belonging and inclusion disparities in race/ethnicity, comparing sexual minorities with gender minorities, and looking at gender more broadly — is needed to understand how the workplace can influence the health and well-being of LGBT SMs and the links to retention, attrition, and transition.

In early 2021, upon inauguration of a new U.S. president, the ban on open transgender service was repealed.⁵¹ At the time of this writing, all official policies banning open service of LGBT SMs across all branches of the U.S. military have been repealed. Because this study found a significant risk for attrition among transgender SMs compared with cisgender LGB and non-LGBT SMs in binomial analyses at the time of data collection, the military must ensure efforts are made to retain all qualified SMs, in part by encouraging in-group status of this population. Accordingly, one study found that acceptance of open transgender service varies by demographic sub-group. Cisgender servicewomen were found to have a higher likelihood of supporting open transgender service than were cisgender servicemen after adjusting for sexual orientation, age, race, branch, rank, and length of service. Cisgender LGB and non-white SMs also had higher rates of support for open transgender service compared with cisgender heterosexual and white SMs, respectively.⁵² These results suggest that interventions to improve acceptance of transgender SMs may use a targeted approach.

Although this study found that LGBT SMs reported lower rates of perceived unit cohesion and military career withdrawal than non-LGBT SMs, it is worth noting that lower levels of unit cohesion were found to be associated with a higher risk for withdrawal among non-LGBT SMs as well. To encourage improved retention of all SMs, the military can prioritize a culture of inclusion. As stated by a workplace inclusion researcher, creating a climate for inclusion entails involving individuals in the organizational system such that they perceive having access to critical information and decision-making channels and feel integrated into both formal and informal spaces.² To feel a sense of job satisfaction and commitment to the organization, employees must have two needs satisfied: a sense of belonging and a sense of uniqueness. This is possible only when individuals can share their authentic selves in the work setting.² Moreover, unit cohesion has been found to have broader health effects on SMs, such as being protective of unit members developing mental health conditions and concurrently creating an environment in which individuals are more likely to seek help for mental health issues.^{53,54} Hence, improving unit cohesion is an attractive point of intervention that could have several positive outcomes that improve operational effectiveness, retention, and SMs' health outcomes.

This study's results indicate that further interventions and policies are needed to have an impact on the level of LGBT inclusivity in the culture of the military as a whole and the climate of individual military units. Previous research has found that improving LGBT inclusiveness not only has a positive impact on members of this community but also draws talent from, and increases retention of, LGBT allies as well.⁵⁵ Studies on improving inclusion of historically marginalized populations in the workplace have also recommended developing and consistently adhering to an anti-discrimination policy, creating official support and community-building programs for targeted groups, encouraging vocal allyship by modelling it at the highest levels of the organization and among high-status individuals, such as medical doctors and chaplains, and offering LGBT-friendly benefits in areas such as assistive reproductive technology, gender-affirming medical care, and access to pre-exposure prophylaxis when indicated for those at heightened risk of being infected with HIV.⁵⁶⁻⁵⁸

Future research on this topic should examine differences in career intent by military career field, mental and physical health status, sexual orientation and gender identity sub-groups, and family needs. Moreover, the current study found that non-white SMs were at twice the risk for indecision about their military career plans compared with white SMs; research on the causes of this disparity should be conducted, and findings could suggest broader issues of inclusion across minority groups in the U.S. Armed Forces.

Strengths and limitations

This is the first study to examine the career intentions of LGBT SMs in the United States. It provides much-needed evidence on the relationship between perceptions about workplace acceptance and unit cohesion and career intent for LGBT SMs, as well as for non-LGBT SMs who may also feel that they do not belong in their units. Limitations of the study should be noted. Although this non-probability sample was large enough to run analyses, the sample size is a relatively small sample, and generalizability is limited. Because of the sample size, the researchers were unable to determine whether within-group differences by sub-group sexual orientation and gender identity were present (i.e., bisexual males compared with bisexual females; transgender heterosexual males compared with cisgender heterosexual males). Because this was a cross-sectional study, correlation, not causation, can be inferred by these find-

ings. The authors also acknowledge the shifting climate for the transgender community during the time in which data were collected. Participants' responses offer a snapshot-in-time account of their sense of inclusion and military career intent less than a year after the ban on open transgender service was repealed and abruptly reinstated by a new administration.^{19,59} In addition, military career intent was collected with a single survey item, with response options categorized for analyses, which may limit the robustness of these findings. The research team acknowledges the potentially poor generalizability of the sample to the greater LGBT military population.

In addition, the majority of sexual and gender minority respondents were white, gay males and serving in the army, which may not reflect the broader community. Officers were over-represented in the sample, and enlisted personnel were under-represented. In an effort to ensure representation of transgender SMs, this study intentionally recruited members of this community as participants, resulting in transgender individuals making up 11% of the sample, compared with the less than 1% they make up of the broader military.⁴⁶ Finally, the study was unable to account for the possibility that poor job performance, failure to promote, or other non-accounted for factors could be related to SMs' overall military career path and plans. Further research should address these limitations using more comprehensive measures of career intentions, longitudinal data, and larger sample sizes.

Conclusion

This study's findings suggest that DADT, an explicitly discriminatory policy meant to remove LGB SMs from the military workforce, may have been replaced with an implicit culture of exclusion for members of this historical out-group. In this way, it could be the case that despite current inclusive policies, a legacy of DADT continues in the form of LGBT disengagement and attrition as a result of anti-LGBT sentiment in SMs' units. Such a cultural lag behind policy change forecasts a similar delay in the inclusion of transgender personnel. Recent revocations of transgender-exclusive DoD policies may not immediately translate to a sense of belonging within the military among this group, especially as the United States sees a rise in anti-transgender sentiment and state policies.⁵⁹ Improvements in sense of integration of an LGBT-accepting culture could encourage greater military career commitment by addressing issues of perceived organizational support. To effectively

prioritize SM recruitment, retention, operational effectiveness, and well-being, the U.S. military must also prioritize a sense of belonging and inclusion among this historically discriminated against population.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

The views expressed in this material are those of the authors and do not reflect the official policy and position of the U.S. Government, the Department of Defense, or the Department of the Air Force.

Nicola T. Fear is a trustee of a charity supporting the well-being of Veterans and their families.

CONTRIBUTORS

Kathleen A. McNamara helped select the research questions, ran the statistical analyses, created the tables, analyzed the results, drafted the Analyses, Results, and Discussion sections, and edited the manuscript. Rachael Gribble helped conceptualize the research questions, authored the Methods section, and edited and revised the manuscript tables. Marie-

Louise Sharp conducted the literature search and edited and revised the manuscript. Eva Alday, Giselle Corletto, and Carrie L. Lucas helped conceptualize the manuscript and authored the Theoretical Approach section. Carl A. Castro, Jeremy T. Goldbach, and Ian W. Holloway were primary investigators of the larger study and offered feedback throughout the conceptualization of this article. Nicola T. Fear offered feedback on the construction of research questions and was instrumental in bringing together the cross-continental, cross-disciplinary research team. All authors approved the final version submitted for publication.

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