

How Sexuality Information Impacts Attitudes and Behaviors Toward Gay Service Members

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The repeal of the Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy raises several questions and this article examines two of these: (1) Do gay/lesbian service members elicit personal discomfort in coworkers? and (2) Do gay/lesbian service members receive equitable administrative actions? Active duty Air Force office personnel ($N = 181$) reported their attitudes toward open service and responded to hypothetical scenarios depicting gay/lesbian or heterosexual male/female subordinates. Gays/lesbians elicited more personal comfort than heterosexuals, and no differences existed between gays/lesbians and heterosexuals in administrative actions. Attitudes toward open service predicted personal comfort but not administrative action ratings.

Prior to 1973, homosexuality was listed as a mental disorder in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM; American Psychiatric Association, 1973) and listed specifically as a disqualifying mental illness with respect to military service. However, even after removal from the DSM,

The views and opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not reflect an endorsement by the U.S. government.

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homosexuality continued to be considered incompatible with military service (DOD Directive 1332.14) and was listed as a mental disorder in a 1996 Defense Department directive (DOD Directive 1332.28) until 2004, when it was removed.

In 1993, President Bill Clinton began actions to repeal the position that homosexual conduct was incompatible with military service and grounds for discharge. However, the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Congress, and factions of the public opposed these actions and enacted the Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT) policy (DOD Directive 1332.14) into military law as an attempted compromise. This law stated that "sexual orientation is considered a private matter, and is not a bar to continued service . . . unless manifested by homosexual conduct." DADT further stated that military members could not ask others about their sexual orientation and that gay, lesbian, or bisexual service members could not reveal their sexual orientation to their commanders, their peers, or their subordinates or make any statement regarding their sexual orientation in civilian environments. DADT also precluded commanders from investigating military members' sexual orientation without just cause, and from making sexual orientation jokes and derogatory references toward gays. Thus, stereotypes and rumor were not enough to launch an investigation into one's sexual orientation. Finally, DADT prohibited all military members from harassing those service members who were rumored to be gay or who acted "stereotypically gay."

DADT was in effect until late 2010, when Congress and President Barack Obama signed the Don't Ask, Don't Tell Repeal Act. This repeal and the lifting of the previous ban on openly gay or lesbian military service presents new concerns for the U.S. military and its service members. While much previous research has focused on the effects that repealing DADT and lifting the ban on open service would have on the military as a whole (Burrelli & Feder, 2009; National Defense Research Institute [NDRI], 2010) or on heterosexual service members (e.g., Estrada & Laurence, 2009; Estrada & Weiss, 1999; Moradi & Miller, 2010), we focus instead on concerns that individual gay or lesbian service members now face. The repeal of DADT marks new, unfamiliar ground for these individuals. Specifically, gay and lesbian service members now have the option of choosing whether or not to be open about their sexual orientations on the job. This represents an extremely important decision for any gay or lesbian employee—however, given the military's history with policies that specifically exclude openly gay or lesbian service, this decision is all the more precarious. Our research addresses two specific concerns that gay or lesbian service members may have as they consider open service: (1) whether their fellow service members will be personally comfortable with them at the individual level, and (2) whether they will be treated fairly with respect to administrative action and procedures.

Personal Comfort

There have been some arguments as to why open service should not be allowed, and research on other countries' militaries has been very informative. For instance, this research has shown that open service in Israel did not provide decrements in military performance, readiness, morale, or cohesion (Belkin & Levitt, 2001). Additionally, research on the Canadian Forces' adoption of open service did not show detriments in performance (Belkin & McNichol, 2001). In sum, then, the cohesion and performance arguments to banning open service (see DOD Directive 1332.14) have not garnered support. However, what is less clear is the level of personal comfort that coworkers might feel and express toward military members who serve openly.

Previous research examining comfort levels of active-duty military members around gay or lesbian individuals has shown that they are generally fairly comfortable. Specifically, Moradi and Miller (2010) asked 545 active duty service members in 2006 to rate their comfort levels, and the results revealed that 74% were very or somewhat comfortable in the presence of gays and lesbians, 18% were uncomfortable or very uncomfortable, and 8% indicated that they were not sure. Similar research has reported that 73% of recent (Iraq and Afghanistan) veterans and active duty military members are comfortable in the presence of gays and lesbians (VetVoice Foundation, 2010; Zogby, Bruce, Whittman, & Rodgers, 2006). Based on these findings, it seems that military members may be quite comfortable around gays or lesbians.

Although we believe that overall levels of reported comfort toward gay or lesbian service members will be positive, it seemed unlikely—from an intergroup perspective—that attitudes toward gay or lesbian service members would be more favorable than those toward heterosexual service members. Thus, we predicted:

Hypothesis 1: Although targets depicted as gay or lesbian might be rated positively, military members will indicate significantly lower levels of personal comfort with targets depicted as homosexual rather than heterosexual.

Administrative Actions

Another concern that gay or lesbian service members may have focuses on unfair administrative actions, which were cited frequently before and after the enactment of DADT. One example includes staging gay witch hunts in which service members posed as gay or lesbian to encourage actual gay men and lesbians to come out and thus be discharged (see Benecke & Dodge, 1992). Indeed, DADT was modified to include Don't Pursue and Don't Harass as well as Don't Ask and Don't Tell in order to further protect gay and lesbian service members. Nevertheless, problems still arose despite these laws (for example, *Cook v. Gates*, 2008). It is likely that individuals who have negative attitudes toward gay or lesbian service

members may be more likely to pursue administrative action against them versus their heterosexual counterparts, but this possibility has not yet been empirically tested. However, based on descriptive research showing people's prejudicial intentions (e.g., Badgett, Sears, Lau, & Ho, 2009), we postulated that:

Hypothesis 2: Military members will indicate a greater likelihood of pursuing administrative action against targets depicted as homosexual than heterosexual.

Relations Between Variables

Previous meta-analyses have established a strong link between expressed attitudes and behaviors ($r = .52$ from Glasman & Albarracin, 2006; $r = .38$ from Kraus, 1995). Goodman and Moradi (2008) recently found that attitudes toward gays and lesbians predicted behaviors toward them as well, with correlation coefficients ranging from .20 to .49. These ranges replicate previous research showing a similar attitude-behavior link toward gay and lesbian targets (e.g., Franklin, 2000; Patel, Long, McCammon, & Wuensch, 1995; Whitley, 2001). Given this past research, we anticipated that:

Hypothesis 3: Military members' attitudes toward open service will be (H3a) positively related to their personal comfort ratings and (H3b) negatively related to their recommended administrative actions.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 243 active-duty Air Force members, 181 of which fully completed the survey, took part in the study. The sample was 84% male, and the mean age of participants was 28.8 years ($SD = 6.9$ years). Most participants were Caucasian (81.4%), followed by Hispanic (6.4%) and Asian (4.1%). The majority of participants (62.5%) had between 2 and 8 years of service, and 83.5% were between O2 and O4 pay grades (between 1st lieutenant and major).

Procedure

We contacted participants using: (1) a convenience sample of already established contacts, (2) e-mail addresses obtained from Air Force-related groups on social networking sites, (3) posted links in web forums and message boards, and (4) snowballing techniques. All participants were sent an e-mail invitation and link to a survey and were asked to forward the survey link to other potentially

eligible individuals. It was not possible to compute a response rate because we have no way of knowing how many people, in total, received e-mail invitations or visited web forums.

Consenting participants followed a web link that led them to one of four randomized conditions. Each condition began with a hypothetical vignette (Appendix) in which the participant was asked to role-play the part of a supervisor for LT Smith, who was depicted as exhibiting ambiguously poor performance. Specifically, Smith often arrived late, his/her appearance was not up to Air Force regulations, and his/her work needed improvement. The conditions were created by manipulating the gender (male vs. female) and sexual orientation (gay vs. heterosexual) of LT Smith. Participants then responded to the Personal Comfort Scale, the Administrative Action Scale, and the Attitudes Toward Open Service Scale. This was followed by items assessing demographic characteristics (gender, age, ethnicity, and military rank) and a manipulation check. Finally, participants were thanked and debriefed concerning the study's purpose.

Measures

All survey items were developed for the purpose of this study. The items were anchored by a 9-point, Likert-type scale (1 = "strongly disagree," 5 = "neither agree nor disagree," 9 = "strongly agree") unless otherwise noted.

Administrative action scale. Participants indicated their likelihood to take administrative action via four items. These items included, "I would initiate discharge procedures for LT Smith," "I would take administrative action against LT Smith," "I would start an Unfavorable Information File (UIF) on LT Smith," and, "I would give LT Smith an Article 15." Initial examination of the interitem correlation matrix indicated that all of the items were positively intercorrelated, ranging from .27 to .71. (mean interitem correlation = .44). Results of principal axis factor analysis clearly suggested that items loaded into a single unidimensional factor, and the Eigenvalue for the factor was 2.3, accounting for 58.4% of the common variance; thus, we calculated an Administrative Action Composite ($\alpha = .73$).

Personal comfort scale. Participants indicated their personal comfort via four items. The personal comfort items included "I would feel comfortable working with LT Smith," "Being around LT Smith would cause me personal discomfort (reverse scored)," "I might feel hostile toward LT Smith (reverse coded)," and "I would avoid office social events that would require personal contact with LT Smith (reverse coded)." Initial examination of the interitem correlation matrix indicated that all of the items were positively intercorrelated, ranging from .13 to .59. (mean interitem correlation = .33). Results of principal axis factor analysis again suggested that items loaded into a single unidimensional factor, and the

Eigenvalue for the factor was 2.0, accounting for 50.0% of the common variance; thus a Personal Comfort Composite was created ($\alpha = .66$).

Attitudes toward open service scale. To assess attitudes toward gay and lesbian service members, participants responded to two items. The items included, "Gay and lesbian individuals should be allowed to serve openly in the military," and "I would still have joined the military if gays and lesbians were allowed to serve openly." These items were highly correlated with each other ($r = .56$), and principal axis factor analysis suggested that a unidimensional factor (accounting for 80.0% of the common variance) was appropriate. Alpha reliability of these items was .69.

Demographics and manipulation check. Participants completed several items measuring demographic and individual difference variables, including gender, race, and military rank. The final section of the survey included the manipulation check. The instructions asked participants to identify the sexual orientation and gender of the target from the vignette presented earlier.

RESULTS

We first present the results of the empirical tests comparing personal comfort and administrative action ratings by gender and sexual orientation. We then present results concerning the relation between attitudes toward open service and ratings of personal comfort and administrative action behaviors.

Personal Comfort

A 2×2 (sexual orientation \times gender) analysis of variance with Attitudes Toward Open Service as a covariate revealed that participants responded with more personal comfort ratings when Smith was presented as gay ($M = 6.58$, $SD = 1.25$) than when Smith was not presented as gay ($M = 6.02$, $SD = 1.29$). This main effect was statistically significant, $F(1, 239) = 10.98$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .06$. There was no evidence of a main effect of gender, $F(1, 239) = 0.06$, $p = .80$, and no evidence of an interaction between sexual orientation and gender, $F(1, 239) = 0.11$, $p = .75$. Thus, Hypothesis 1 was not supported.

Administrative Action

A second 2×2 (sexual orientation \times gender) analysis with Attitudes Toward Open Service as a covariate revealed no significant main effects for sexual orientation, $F(1, 239) = 0.09$, $p = .76$, or gender, $F(1, 239) = 0.08$, $p = .78$. There was

also no evidence of an interaction between sexual orientation and gender, $F(1, 239) = 0.01, p = .94$. In short, Hypothesis 2 was not supported.

Relations Between Attitudes and Behaviors

Regression analyses revealed that for participants in the gay/lesbian conditions, attitudes toward open service were significantly related to ratings of personal comfort, $\beta = .35, p < .001$, but not to ratings of administrative action toward LT Smith, $\beta = .13, p = .19$. Separate analyses by gender (gay men and lesbians as targets) revealed this same pattern (no gender differences). Thus, Hypothesis 3 was partially supported.

Manipulation Check

Participants were asked to indicate the gender and sexual orientation of LT Smith depicted in the vignette after completing all previous study measures. The majority of respondents (76.2%) answered all of the manipulation check questions correctly. Performing the aforementioned analyses using only the respondents who successfully passed the manipulation checks did not alter the pattern of results.

DISCUSSION

This research set out to address specific concerns that gay or lesbian service members may have following the repeal of the U.S. military's Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy. Specifically, this research sought to investigate (1) whether heterosexual military members would be more or less personally comfortable in the presence of gay or lesbian coworkers, and (2) whether military members would seek punitive action differentially based on sexual orientation alone. Overall, the pattern of results obtained from our sample of U.S. Air Force officers suggests that each of these potential concerns may not be large problems in a post-DADT military.

This study allowed for direct tests of differences with respect to personal comfort and administrative action outcomes based on the sexual orientation and gender of target subordinates. With respect to personal comfort, the target was rated *higher* when depicted as being gay than when depicted as being heterosexual (there were no gender differences). Although it is surprising that participants would indicate being *more* comfortable in the presence of gays/lesbians than heterosexuals (and indeed this was a medium/small effect using Cohen's guidelines; 1988), it is clear that participants were not uncomfortable with the thought of working closely with gay service members. Even if participants were responding to demand characteristics and trying to avoid seeming prejudiced, the fact that they could acknowledge how their responses might be negatively construed and adjust accordingly is indicative of a willingness and ability to behave in a

nonbiased manner. The notion that participants might have “faked” their attitudes on the survey indicates at least that they can likely do the same when faced with actual situations.

With respect to administrative action, our hypothesis was not supported. Although we predicted that gay or lesbian targets would be the recipients of more harsh administrative action than heterosexual targets, this was not borne out by the data. This could be interpreted as a very positive finding. If it is the case that gay or lesbian service members would receive the same administrative levels of administrative action as their heterosexual counterparts, then this is evidence for fairness and equality with respect to sexual orientation. However, due to the inability of the current study to rule out other possible alternative explanations (e.g., particularities of this sample, wording of the specific items or vignette) for why the predicted results were not found, it would not be fair to interpret the results in this way without future research. Thus, alternative explanations need to be exhausted before this result can be accepted as reasonable. Nevertheless, the current results with respect to administrative action are an encouraging, although preliminary, first step.

Finally, the results suggested a positive relation between attitudes toward open service and personal comfort. In many ways, this is intuitive. However, this result has important implications for military policy following DADT. Specifically, attitudes toward open service accounted for 3% of the variance in personal comfort ratings, and this relation suggests that those whose attitudes concerning open service are improved may also experience more personal comfort around gay or lesbian service members. There will likely be a concerted effort in the military to integrate open service following the repeal of DADT. Thus, training to highlight the positive effects of open service may be a critical component in attitude change for heterosexual service members who may nonetheless have persistent negative stereotypes about gay or lesbian individuals. This “business case” for open service may help breed acceptance and genuine attitude change among military members, rather than merely compliance coupled with internal resistance. Indeed, the RAND Corporation specified that “prominent leaders . . . can facilitate change by articulating clear and consistent reasons for the change that link to the mission of the organization,” in their report on the implementation of a post-DADT military (NDRI, 2010). Furthermore, focusing on these mission-specific behaviors rather than on internally held attitudes is more likely to result in acceptance if it creates an appeal to obedience to authority, a core value of military culture (NDRI, 2010).

We found no support for the relation between attitudes about open service and administrative action ratings. Again, this finding should be interpreted with extreme caution, because the lack of evidence of a relation does not mean that it does not exist. One explanation could be that the behaviors enacted by Smith were not egregious enough to warrant administrative action. We attempted to provide a

scenario that depicted ambiguously poor performance to allow for attitudes (rather than obvious military protocol) to influence responses. However, it is possible that our manipulation was not strong enough. If further empirical testing does reveal that there is no relation between attitudes toward open service and administrative action, then this is also very encouraging. This would suggest that one's attitudes toward open service do not have an impact (for better or worse) on administrative action consequences. Thus, gay or lesbian service members would receive the same treatment as their heterosexual counterparts, regardless of their supervisors' personal attitudes concerning gays/lesbians in the military. Again, future research will have to corroborate this finding more rigorously, but these initial results are nonetheless encouraging.

Implications

This research has several implications for the military in this time of organizational change. Of particular note in this study is the focus on individual gay or lesbian service members. While most previous research has focused on the military as a whole (with respect to mission readiness) or on heterosexual military members (with respect to attitudes and/or unit cohesion), this study highlights the importance of focusing on the unique situation that gay or lesbian service members now face in a military in which they have the option of serving openly. We believe that this is fertile ground for future research, especially given the unique organizational environment of the military. Rarely have organizations so radically changed their personnel policies from one in which a group of employees were systematically fired to one in which they were allowed to work freely. Future research should take advantage of this unique opportunity for organizational investigation.

Because these data were collected immediately before the repeal of DADT was announced, the results presented here represent a single snapshot of attitudes in the midst of major organizational changes. As such, it will be extremely important to track the attitudes as the long-term consequences of the repeal are more fully realized. Such longitudinal data are extremely valuable not only for organizational decision makers in the military, but also for researchers interested in the interaction of social attitudes and public policy changes. Allport (1954) argued that laws concerning discrimination are an important precursor to larger attitudinal change within a society; thus, the changing of the policy concerning open service in the military may allow for a rare opportunity to track such changes as they unfold.

Limitations

By using an active-duty military sample, we sought to enhance the generalizability of the study's results. However, to obtain this sample we relied on a convenience

sample of known military members and utilized their connections using a snowballing recruitment technique as well as online social networking websites. This method, although efficient for our purpose, may not have yielded a random or representative sample of military members. In addition, it is possible that the attitudes of active duty Air Force personnel are not reflective of other branches of the military. For instance, attitudes toward open service tend to be more negative in Army combat and Marine Corps units (Department of Defense, 2010). Therefore, we strongly encourage more research using larger samples to corroborate the generalizability of the results beyond our own sample. Relatedly, because it was impossible to track how many individuals were sent an invitation to participate in the study, we could not estimate the response rate. It could be that only those who were passionate about DADT elected to participate.

In addition, the results of this study are based on hypothetical situations and targets, not on real-life interactions. Thus, whether military members would react to actual subordinates in the same way as the participants responded to the hypothetical subordinates in this study is impossible to say. Future studies on military personnel data in a post-DADT environment will inform the external validity of these findings.

Finally, the directionality of the relations among the variables should be clearly established in future research. Specifically, it is unclear whether personal comfort around gays or lesbians influences attitudes toward open service or if the attitudes toward open service influence personal comfort. Future research can clarify the nature of this relation.

Conclusion

This research highlights several important aspects of gay and lesbian service in the U.S. military. An experimental manipulation assessing the effect of varying the sexual orientation and gender of a hypothetical subordinate revealed that the Air Force officers in our study tended to feel more comfortable in the presence of gays and lesbians (compared to heterosexuals). This addresses potential concerns that gay or lesbian service members may have when deciding whether or not to serve openly—a choice that was not available prior to the repeal of DADT. It will remain important to monitor the effects of the lift of the ban on open service from an organizational perspective (the military as a whole) as well as the effects on individual service members, particularly gay or lesbian ones.

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APPENDIX HYPOTHETICAL VIGNETTE GIVEN TO PARTICIPANTS

Imagine yourself in the following scenario:

You are a squadron commander assigned to a flying squadron in a combat zone (the Continental United States). It is a military time of war (peace) and recruits face the threat of casualty (educational and employment opportunities). It has come to your attention that 2nd Lt Smith is not a very conscientious individual. She (he) is not getting her (his) assigned work done and when she (he) does, the work is not very high quality. She (He) often arrives late in the morning, and her (his) uniform and appearance are not up to Air Force regulations (i.e., wrinkled uniform, hair out of regulation, poor hygiene). You have also heard several rumors that 2nd Lt Smith is a lesbian (gay, engaged), although she (he) seems to be relatively discreet, in general, about her (his) personal life.

Please answer the following questions surrounding this scenario and your evaluation of 2nd Lt Smith.