



“You Don’t Want to Be a Candidate for Punishment”: a Qualitative Analysis of LGBT Service Member “Outness”

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Abstract

Introduction Policies regarding lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) military service members in the U.S. have changed dramatically over the last nine years. Cisgender LGB service members can now disclose their authentic identity without threat of discharge. Open transgender service was banned, then permitted, then banned again. Limited empirical evidence exists to assess the wellbeing of the estimated 74,000 LGBT service members who have served during these changes. This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the “coming out” experiences of LGBT service members following repeal of LGBT bans.

Methods In-depth interviews were conducted with 37 active duty LGBT military members in the Army, Air Force, Navy, and Marines stationed on American military bases worldwide in 2016.

Results Thematic analysis of these data found that half of participants feared that the military environment, at both the institutional and interpersonal level, is not yet LGBT inclusive. However, most participants employed outness in the military as a means of presenting their authentic identity to others and paving the way for other LGBT service members to be “out.”

Conclusions While repeal of LGBT bans provide a sense of institutional protection and improvement in quality of life among LGBT service members, barriers to disclosure remain. As the “first generation” serving after repeals, this population weighs perceived risks and benefits to disclosure as they determine what it looks like to be an openly LGBT military member.

Policy Implications Results from the present analysis suggest retention of LGB-affirming regulations and re-implementation of transgender-inclusive policy.

Keywords Military · LGBT · Workplace · Policy · Outness · Coming out · Disclosure

Introduction

In 1994, the so-called “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, Don’t Pursue” (DADTDP or DADT) policy was passed in the US Congress and signed into law by the President (“Don’t Ask Don’t Tell,”

1993). This policy stated that “homosexuals” could serve in the military, but could not speak openly about their homosexuality, could not be asked about their sexual orientation, and could not be pursued by their Command due to speculations they may be lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB; “Do not Ask Do

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not Tell,” 1993). If service members defied the policy, or Command confirmed that a service member was involved in a same-sex relationship or had same-sex romantic interest, then the service member could be discharged without benefits (Alford & Lee, 2016). More than 13,000 service members were discharged for being perceived as lesbian, gay, or bisexual under DADT (Gates, 2010).

After the *Do not Ask, Do not Tell Repeal Act of 2010* was passed by Congress, signed by President Barack Obama, and received DoD approval, LGB service members were granted permission to “come out” in the military workplace without fear of reprisal for the first time in US history (Alford & Lee, 2016; Goldbach & Castro, 2016). On the day he signed the repeal, President Barack Obama stated: “No longer will tens of thousands of Americans in uniform be asked to live a lie, or look over their shoulder, in order to serve the country that they love” (Obama, 2010). Similarly, in 2016 when Secretary of Defense Ash Carter announced repeal of the transgender ban, which had been in place for over 50 years, transgender service members were permitted to disclose their identity to their military colleagues, including Commanders and medical providers, for the first time (U.S. DoD, 2016a; U.S. DoD, 2016b). The current study, which collected data shortly after the transgender ban was repealed, and before the subsequent presidential administration threatened to reinstate it, is the first of its kind to assess disclosure decision-making of LGBT identity among still-serving, active duty service members following repeal of LGBT military bans (Liptak, 2019; Trump, 2017; *Trump v. Karnoski*, 2019). Whether LGBT service members continue to “look over their shoulder” despite policy change remains to be seen, and motivates the current study.

An estimated 65,000 cisgender LGB and 9000 transgender individuals are serving on active duty, with 5% of active duty members indicating they are LGBT (12% of women and 3% of men; < 1% of both women and men indicate they are transgender; Belkin & Mazur, 2018; Davis, Grifka, Williams, & Coffey, 2016; Meadows et al., 2018). A history of institutionalized discrimination against LGBT service members spanning at least 60 years, as well as probable associated victimization, suggests a possibly non-linear progression from exclusion to inclusion of LGBT service members (Berube, 1990; Burks, 2011; Castro & Goldbach, 2018; Estes, 2005). These service members may not perceive an accepting military environment and may not feel secure in disclosing their authentic sexual orientation and/or gender identity, despite relaxation of LGBT military bans.

LGBT Outness in the Workplace

Disclosing or concealing one’s LGBT identity in civilian settings is associated with several workplace-related outcomes such as job satisfaction, feelings of stress at work, collective self-esteem, work-related commitment, organizational

citizenship behaviors, and interpersonal coworker relationships (Bowring, 2017; Huebner & Davis, 2005; Pachankis, Cochran, & Mays, 2015; Trau, 2015; Velez, Moradi, & Brewster, 2013). Disclosure in the workplace is influenced by factors at the personal, interpersonal, and institutional level. Centrality of LGB orientation to one’s identity, positive past experiences of disclosure, being in a relationship with a same-sex partner, and lower levels of internalized homophobia are associated with greater workplace disclosure (Griffith & Hebl, 2002; King, Mohr, Peddie, Jones, & Kendra, 2017; Pachankis et al., 2015; Schope, 2002; Wessel, 2017). Traits related to the “disclosee” such as vocal support of an LGB human rights issue, LGB orientation of the disclosee, and female gender of the disclosee are linked to higher levels of disclosing at work (Griffith & Hebl, 2002; King et al., 2017; Rostosky & Riggle, 2002; Wessel, 2017). Perceiving an LGB-supportive environment, witnessing other sexual minorities disclose with no negative consequence, explicit policies protecting LGB workers from anti-LGB harassment, and having at least one supportive coworker are associated with more workplace disclosure (King et al., 2017; Ragins et al., 2007; Velez et al., 2013; Wessel, 2017). Women in masculine-dominated fields may disclose their sexual minority identity to fend off unwanted romantic advances from male coworkers, as well as to decrease stigma associated with being female in a male-dominated job (Helens-Hart, 2017).

LGBT Service Member and Veteran Outness

Disclosure in the military workplace is likely similar to that of a civilian setting; emerging research suggests that the military’s recent history of exclusionary policies causes additional concerns for LGBT service members as they navigate disclosure decision-making. For example, sexual minority service members report using “identity concealment” strategies before and after repeal of DADT, such as taking proactive measures to ensure colleagues do not suspect they may be LGB, discreetly developing social support with other LGB service members, and assessing the environment for safety prior to disclosure (Van Gilder, 2017).

Most active duty lesbian servicewomen note an increase in their comfort seeking mental health services following DADT repeal; servicewomen who reported no increased comfort in seeking mental health care say they fear that individual anti-LGBT attitudes may remain among healthcare providers despite DADT repeal (Mount, Steelman, & Hertlein, 2015). One lesbian servicewoman felt that LGB service members were “a hunted group” under DADT, for which the psychological effects persist in the form of feelings of isolation and insecurity (Mount et al., 2015, p. 121). Several servicewomen expressed concern regarding the lack of confidentiality in military medical services, and the fear that their sexual orientation would become known to those other than the therapist to whom they

may disclose (Mount et al., 2015). While 100% of US active duty gay and bisexual males in one study expressed understanding that disclosure could no longer be used by the military to negatively affect their careers, only 70% of respondents indicated comfort disclosing to their healthcare provider (Biddix, Fogel, & Perry Black, 2013).

Two in three LGBT veterans accessing Veterans Health Administration (VHA) services report that they have disclosed their sexual orientation to none, a few, or some of their VHA providers, while one in three disclose to most/many or all of their VHA providers (Mattocks et al., 2015; Sherman, Kauth, Shipherd, & Street, 2014). One in three LGBT veterans describe the VHA as *unwelcoming*, one in three as *somewhat welcoming*, and one in three as *neither welcoming nor unwelcoming* to LGBT veterans (Sherman et al., 2014). One in three lesbian veterans report being afraid that they would experience discrimination from their VHA providers whom they disclose their sexual orientation, with some expressing concern that the provider may hold anti-LGBT religious beliefs (Mattocks et al., 2015). Unlike the DoD, the VHA has never adopted explicitly discriminatory policies akin to the Department of Defense's DADT policy (VHA Directive 1340(1), 2017). Taken together, these results indicate that LGBT veterans, for the most part, remain reluctant to share their sexual orientation or transgender identities, even in a healthcare setting with anti-discrimination policies that are inclusive of LGBT people.

The experience of sexual minorities serving in the Canadian military may give insight into possible experiences of sexual minorities in the US military. One study found that service members' "police" gender presentation of others, specifically rewarding a dominant, masculine presentation, with a caveat that women presenting as too masculine may violate nuanced gender norms (Poulin, Gouliquer, & McCutcheon, 2018, p. 65). To avoid or cope with these stressors, gay and lesbian service members sometimes pass as straight or attempt to get stationed at bases with an LGBT affirmative environment (Poulin et al., 2018). As the Canadian military has permitted open LGBT service since 1992, this study points to anti-LGBT sentiment prevalent in a military environment despite repeal of LGBT-excluding policies (Poulin et al., 2018). If the US military progression is anything like that of the Canadian military, the future for LGBT service members may contain additional barriers to disclosure.

Theoretical Considerations

While no theory exists to predict LGBT disclosure in a military workplace setting, one main theory aided the umbrella study ("Military Acceptance Project," 2016) in conceptualizing LGBT service members' well-being and inclusion. Minority stress theory (MST) explains the ways in which having a stigmatized identity can impact one's treatment by

others, access to social support, and ultimately one's health. MST explains that stigmatized groups suffer prejudice from the community, which adds a burden of social stress, and associated mental and physical health problems follow. Such stress can be experienced through bullying, discrimination, violence, expectations of rejection, internalized homophobia, and identity concealment (Meyer, 2003). In a military setting, otherwise "normative" stressful events that are experienced by all service members regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity can be lived as "minority stress" for LGBT individuals. For example, moving from one duty station to the next, which typically occurs once every 1 to 4 years, can be inherently stressful for any person. For an LGBT individual, this might be compounded by the uncertain environment they are entering, and whether they will be rejected if they disclose their LGBT identity. In a military environment, discrimination and harassment may be explicit or implicit, and may manifest in different ways than in a civilian workplace (Goldbach & Castro, 2016). From an MST framework, it can be hypothesized that LGBT individuals will overwhelmingly choose to conceal their identity in a military environment despite DADT repeal unless they perceive a supportive climate, accepting coworkers, and have low internalized negativity.

The current qualitative analysis builds on existing literature of LGBT employee well-being by analyzing in-depth interviews of active duty LGBT service members. This study aimed to fill in the gaps yet to be addressed in the literature: to what extent and in what conditions do LGBT service members disclose their LGBT identity in the military workplace following DADT and the transgender ban repeals. This information will be meaningful for clinicians, chaplains, and medical personnel serving this population, policymakers, LGBT service members, and unit leaders.

Methods

Participants and Sampling

The research team assembled an expert advisory panel of current and former military members known to the research team and through LGBT networks. This panel met for a 2-day in person meeting, and findings from this process informed development of the interview protocol and recruitment plan. As the LGBT civilian community can be a "hard to reach" population, and LGBT service members in particular can be similarly difficult to reach (Goldbach & Castro, 2016), a multi-pronged recruitment strategy was used: (1) a respondent-driven sampling method was used in order to take advantage of strong networks among this population; (2) to reach LGBT individuals who are not connected or "out" to others in the community, the study advertised through each military branch's official digital and print newspaper; and (3) the

research team promoted the study in private Facebook groups known to a member of the research team. To ensure diversity of sampling, as service members were enrolled, the research team monitored the racial, ethnic, service branch, and sexual/gender identity characteristics of recruited participants. For example, nearing the end of study recruitment, the research team discontinued enrolling Air Force service members because they had comprised more than 30% of the sample. To participate in the interview, service members were required to (1) be at least 18 years of age; (2) speak English; (3) self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, another sexual minority status, and/or transgender; (4) be active duty in the Air Force, Army, Marine Corps, or Navy; and (5) be willing and able to provide consent. A total of 42 LGBT service members took part in the umbrella study. Of these 42 LGBT service members, 37 of the interviewees discussed disclosure of their LGBT identity in a military setting following DADT repeal and their data were therefore used in the present analysis. Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of these individuals.

Table 1 Demographics and military-related traits of qualitative sample

Characteristic	<i>n</i> = 37	Percentage
Gender		
Cismale	18	49%
Cisfemale	10	27%
Transmale	6	16%
Transfemale	3	8%
Sexual orientation		
Heterosexual (all trans)	3	8%
Bisexual/pansexual	6	16%
Gay	17	46%
Lesbian	9	24%
Asexual	2	5%
Age		
22 to 24	7	19%
26 to 30	16	43%
31 to 35	10	27%
36 to 40	4	11%
Branch		
Army	12	32%
Air Force	12	32%
Navy	10	27%
Marine Corps	3	8%
Race		
White	27	73%
Black	3	8%
Latino	5	14%
Asian	2	5%
Total	37	100%

Data Collection Procedures and Instruments

Interested participants emailed or called a central email address or phone number and a research assistant at the University of Southern California or University of California, Los Angeles screened them for eligibility to participate in the study. Research assistants were made available during a 4-month period in 2016 to conduct approximately 90- to 120-min interviews with participants. Interviews were conducted virtually using secure video-conferencing software at no cost to the participants. Participants were given the option of communicating solely through the audio feature or using both the audio and video feature. Consent forms were reviewed prior to beginning interviews, and informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Interviews were audio-recorded using two recording devices to mitigate the possibility of lost data. Participants received one \$25 gift card and up to three \$10 incentives for referring additional LGBT military members. Study protocols were approved by the Institutional Review Boards at both the University of Southern California and the University of California, Los Angeles.

Guided by the life history calendar method of interviewing participants, research assistants conducted semi-structured interviews and allowed participants to identify salient experiences throughout their life as sexual and/or gender minorities and in their military careers (Fisher, 2013). Interviews covered topics such as motivation to join the military, social support, physical and psychological health during their military service, and salient experiences related to identifying as LGBT. Four life history calendar interviews were initially conducted with members of the target population, with the researchers analyzing the data following each interview. Questions were consistent with past use of life history calendar interviews with sexual minorities (Fisher, 2013). Initial analyses evaluated the procedures used by interviewers and the applicability of the interview questions used with the specific aims of the study. Subsequent interview protocols were amended reflecting lessons learned.

Analysis

The umbrella qualitative study (“The Military Acceptance Project,” 2016) was exploratory in nature and employed semi-structured interviews. An external transcribing service transcribed verbatim all interviews, which a research assistant entered into QSR NVivo (version 12.1.1, 2018). Informed by relevant literature and theories (Meyer, 2003; Padgett, 2008), the research team thematically analyzed the data and crafted a codebook which they used to code the initial four interviews. The research team edited the codebook as interviews were conducted, such as making amendments to capture emerging themes and collapsing overlapping themes. Research

assistants paired up for a total of three partnerships; each research assistant independently coded their assigned interviews, which were co-coded by their partner. Partners used a coding consensus worksheet and discussion between coders to reach consensus. In situations in which a consensus was not reached through discussion, coders consulted a third party on the research team. By the end of this iterative process, 100% coder consensus was reached. A total of 30 participants initially were identified as featuring the “Disclosure Stress” code in their interview. The first author of the current study reviewed all 42 interviews to ensure that complete data related to disclosure stress was collected for use in the current analyses; from this process, seven additional interviews were identified as including disclosure stress data relevant to the current study. A member of the research team reviewed these proposed coding amendments and concurred these data should be coded as Disclosure Stress; a total of 37 interviews were included in the present analysis.

Subsequently, first and second authors of the current study independently thematically analyzed those data from a randomly selected portion of data coded as “Disclosure Stress,” identifying major themes and subthemes associated with LGBT disclosure in the military following repeal of discriminatory LGBT policies. This phase of analysis employed a grounded theory approach, allowing themes and subthemes to coalesce through an iterative process. Both coders carefully analyzed the context of all quotes to ensure that only those which referred to post-DADT and transgender ban disclosure were included in the present study. Coders then collaborated over several meetings to review all identified themes, grouped or excluded codes as needed, and formed a final codebook. Both coders then independently coded the remainder of the data. Over a series of sessions, coders reviewed the data together and assigned a final code to all data. While some data could be assigned multiple codes, the more prominent theme was used for final coding analysis. Finally, a third member of the research team was available for consultation in the event of disagreement between coders; however, this step was not needed due to 100% coding consensus among primary reviewers. Finally, the first author utilized quantitative analyses to assess the proportion of participants who endorsed each theme and subtheme as classified by coders (see Table 2). To maintain anonymity of participants, quotations included in this paper are identified by participant number, noted as “P1, P2, P3, etc.”

Results

Of the 37 LGBT service members who discussed disclosure decision-making following DADT repeal, the majority were male, gay, white, aged 26 to 30, and an equal number were in the Army and Air Force (see Table 1). Factors related to

LGBT disclosure decision-making fit into three major themes: institutional, interpersonal, and individual. Individual-level factors were the most prevalent, followed by institutional level, then interpersonal level (70%, 52%, and 49% of participants, respectively; see Table 2).

Institutional

Most participants (59%) noted a reluctance to disclose their LGBT identity due to the fear that they could be negatively affected, despite repeal of anti-LGBT policies. These fears were not necessarily motivated by specific incidents, but rather a “sixth sense” that it may not yet be safe to disclose LGBT identity in the military workplace. These fears were often influenced by a concern that anti-LGBT sentiment persisted in the culture and among anti-LGBT colleagues such that there could be career ramifications to disclosure.

General Fear of Misalignment Between Policy and Culture At

the time of interviews, military policy allowed open LGB service. However, 42% of participants noted a general distrust that the culture of the military workplace and colleagues’ opinions were consistent with inclusive policies. As one woman put it:

That was a fear of mine when I joined the military was yeah, they are allowing LGBT, well, LGB people to come in, but are they actually accepting of it or is it just them saying it because they have to, kind of thing (lesbian, female, Air Force, P19).

This comment underscored a concern noted by many participants, that a colleague or the military in general may outwardly display acceptance of this group while clandestinely maintaining an anti-LGBT stance, thereby undermining the safety of LGBT disclosure. One participant noted being concerned about an unspoken, underlying anti-LGBT bias: “There’s what people think they are and then there’s the subconscious, you know, what they’re willing to give preference to and discriminate against. So, I try not to make it too obvious at work” (bisexual, female, Air Force, P10). Such a comment identified the complicated thought process that this participant experienced; although a fellow service member may outwardly present as LGBT-accepting, the possibility that the coworker might harbor ingrained anti-LGBT sentiment caused this participant to view them as potentially unsafe. Another participant, referring to colleagues in a military healthcare setting, identified a gap between their “official” acceptance of sexual minorities and his perception that there is more education needed:

Table 2 Disclosure stress: major themes and subthemes

Theme and subtheme	Frequency, <i>n</i> = 37	Participants who endorsed (% of 37)
Institutional		
1. General fear of misalignment between policy and culture	21	16 (43%)
2. Fear of negative career repercussions	9	7 (19%)
Total	30	19 (52%)
Interpersonal		
1. Spotting red flags Perceiving cues that indicate LGBT disclosure would be ill-received or unsafe	19	12 (32%)
2. Spotting green and white flags Perceiving cues that indicate LGBT disclosure would be well-received (green flag) or viewed neutrally (white flag)	10	10 (27%)
Total	29	18 (49%)
Individual		
1. Burden of being different	24	12 (32%)
2. Outness in the workplace benefitting others or as a personal strength	19	15 (41%)
3. Questioning relevance/appropriateness of discussing LGBT identity in the workplace	8	7 (19%)
4. Outness outside the military as a strength	4	4 (11%)
Total	55	26 (70%)

Due to participants endorsing > 1 subtheme per theme, results for *Total + Participants who endorsed* are summed as unique individuals

I can tell you right now that it has a long way to go. I think they have [fellow clinicians] learned how to be supportive of same-sex couples, at least politically speaking and officially. However, individually, I think the clinicians have a lot of training and sensitivity training to go through (gay, male, Air Force, P2).

Importantly, policy change alone does not seem to communicate to some LGBT service members themselves that they are necessarily included, understood, or safe.

Some participants identified aspects of the military culture that may be permissive of anti-LGBT sentiment. For example

There's still that stigmata [sic] of it's the old boys' club. You know, this is a macho man's military. I do not run around advertising the fact that I'm gay to most of my workplace. And that's been throughout the entire military career, for at least as long as I've been in (gay, male, Navy, P31).

This participant noted a possibly complex disclosure decision-making, starting with the premise that a "macho man's military" may not be permissive of homosexuality. One participant commented on the transitory nature of military life, noting that he works with new colleagues and is uncertain whether the colleagues have communicated to one another about his sexual orientation. Further, he acknowledged that new colleagues may have opinions not in line with DADT repeal:

[The military] is kind of a small community, so sometimes, your reputation precedes you. So I never know,

oh does this person know I'm gay, and if they do, do they have a problem with it? And then it's like... it's almost like you are walking with landmines everywhere. You want to be careful" (bisexual, male, Air Force, P21; has identified as both gay and bisexual).

The reference to landmines provides powerful imagery of the cautious and calculated disclosure decision-making some participants described. Despite deliberate management of their identity, LGBT service members still expect and fear explosive responses from others that could cause them harm, which are to a certain extent impossible to predict. In addition, several participants alluded to the hierarchical structure of the military, in which higher ranking individuals are perceived to be empowered to act unilaterally in a way that could significantly negatively impact one's life or career.

Career Repercussions General distrust and fear of misalignment between military culture, policy, and personal opinions also manifested as fear of negative career repercussions (e.g., loss of career broadening opportunities; separation from the military) for 19% of participants interviewed. Participants noted a fear of being separated under the guise of a legitimate concern (e.g., poor performance in a class or training), while the underlying and covert purpose was to remove LGBT people from the service. One service member interviewed worried that coming out as transgender may open him up to violence or negative evaluations. He noted an interest in being an advocate for transgender rights, but weighed this with the perceived risks of disclosure:

I did not tell any of my classmates. Obviously, I only told people who knew me already. But I made it very clear to them. I was like ‘I’m not trying to come out and be like a poster child for trans people’ because as amazing as that would be, I have a feeling that there will be some people who are not cool with it and they might try to kill me on my way to my car or some professor might not be cool with it and she’ll like flunk me or he’ll flunk me and I just do not got time for drama right now. Like, let me just try to get through this next tour (straight, transmale, Navy, P18).

In addition to managing disclosure himself, he also ensured that those to whom he did disclose understood that his gender identity was not to be shared with others. He was concerned that the “drama” others may create in reaction to his disclosure would interfere with his plan to perform his military duties and advance to the next stage in his career. Most concerning, he worried that such disclosure could result in his murder by a fellow service member.

One participant viewed his disclosure decision-making directly through the lens of his career projection:

I do not want to screw myself before I even have that opportunity [to be promoted]. I’m in a position like I am right now where I am about to be put on a board for Major and I do not want to not even have that opportunity to put myself where they can easily be like, ‘Get rid of this guy; if we have to cut 55% of the officers up for it, he’s one of the easy ones we can just find a reason to just cover [ourselves].’ So I want to be smart about it. You cannot be a positive role model if you are not even there, if you just get tossed out (gay, male, Marine, P38).

This participant alluded to the military career pyramid, in which fewer service members occupy each ascending rank. This participant would like to be a positive role model for the community; however, this desire is tempered by his fear that disclosure may threaten his chances of job security and military career advancement.

One participant discussed not only carefully managing his gender identity but also carefully managing his other military-related identities. He noted that while he was aware the policy toward transgender service had been altered such that he could come out to his fellow sailors, he was reluctant to do so:

I had pressure to perform like an officer, first and foremost. And then maintain expectations that I wasn’t different in any way. I wasn’t gay, I wasn’t queer. I wasn’t trans. So, I had to fit the Naval officer mold first, in order just to try to survive and qualify. So, you know, back again compartmentalize, get to work. But, again, when everybody said okay, you can come out now. I was like

uh, I do not trust any of ya’ll fuckers. I’d been living like this, not trusting anybody (straight, transmale, Navy, P18).

This service member noted that years of hyper-focusing on fulfilling the demands of his job and prioritizing his identity as a Naval officer established a certain precedent. Disclosing his transgender identity would require a major overhaul not only in his identity construction but also his engrained distrust of fellow service members. The participant had survived in the military environment by de-emphasizing his gender identity not only to others, but also to himself, altering that prioritization will be a complex process in which he must be convinced that “being different” does not jeopardize his career.

One participant noted she is conscientious about the rank and power dynamic between herself and individuals to whom she is considering disclosing:

If it’s a peer or somebody junior to me, I do not really care. I do not care what they say. I do not care, because my career is not in their hands. However, it’s the more senior people that I still am hesitant with because they grew up in the same Navy I did. So regardless of what their opinions are, they may or may not be okay with the [DADT] repeal. And so depending on who the senior person is, or who it is that I’m working for, they could just find reasons to give me that adverse evaluation (lesbian, female, Navy, P7).

In an intersection between the general fear of misalignment between military policy and culture, this participant identified that certain colleagues may be more powerful at negatively impacting her career than others. She commented on her time in the Navy before DADT repeal and considers the possibility that her superiors may personally be compelled to continue to enforce DADT by “finding reasons” to harm her career via her annual performance evaluation.

While several participants reported a general fear of disclosure due to the possibility that others may not be accepting, one participant recounted witnessing his training instructor make explicit anti-LGBT comments. The instructor was reported to use the pejorative term “fags” during class, disclose other people’s sexual minority identity to his students without their permission, and communicate that he believed sexual minorities were more promiscuous than heterosexuals. Classmates notably did not verbally protest the instructor’s behaviors, which may have contributed to the sense that the instructor’s beliefs, as opposed to the aggregate of students’ beliefs, were paramount in creating class climate. The participant, having witnessed this dynamic, stated:

But, here, I would not [disclose sexual orientation] ‘cause I just do not know how that climate would be

with him [training course instructor]. Most of my classmates do not have an issue with it or if they do, they do not say anything, so there's not an issue on that side. But because he's the senior person and he controls a significant amount of my success in this course, I just do not really want to kind of chance anything right now...since the climate is the way it is, might as well just not do it (gay, male, Army, P36).

It should be noted that the participant viewed the majority of his classmates as accepting, but by nature of the instructor's stature in the course, the instructor's opinions superseded that of the participants' classmates. The instructor's opinions alone were perceived by the participant as creating an anti-LGBT climate. Having identified that hierarchy matters, anti-LGBT sentiment was allowed to persist, and instructors were permitted to unilaterally determine students' course success, the participant weighed his options and viewed the risks as significant.

One participant discussed weighing her own values, acknowledging that advancing in the military may require de-prioritizing her competing desire to express her authentic self:

I think that in any organization there's going to be different leadership. And so I think specifically for the sexuality issue, if the tone is set that oh, this is not a good thing and I'm an ambitious person, then, I'm going to decide what's more important to me. You know, like career opportunities or expressing myself and being out and in that situation I'm going to make a decision based on how I feel at that time (lesbian, female Navy, P20).

This participant's acknowledgment that she has clear goals of career advancement seems to streamline her disclosure decision-making.

In sum, while LGBT-accepting policies were important to LGBT service members, disclosure of their LGBT identity to military colleagues was influenced by their sense that colleagues and military culture in general are amenable to inclusive policies. Some participants perceived the military as an institution that was complicit in anti-LGBT behaviors, potentially allowing superiors to promote anti-LGBT views at odds with policy changes.

Interpersonal

Half of participants (49%) noted interpersonal-level factors guiding their disclosure decision-making. These participants stated that they gauge for cues from coworkers to determine whether disclosing to that individual will be safe. This theme of interpersonal cues of acceptance can be grouped into sub-themes, deemed red, green, and white flags. Using the terminology of "flags" which refers to hints, clues, and signifiers

that reveal an underlying attitude, participants noted three categories which separate as hostile (red), accepting (green), and neutral (white).

Spotting Red Flags One in three participants (32%) stated that they were influenced in their disclosure decision-making by witnessing or perceiving that a colleague had a negative attitude toward LGBT individuals in general, or specifically in regard to their service in the military. Red flags are cues that indicate it is likely not safe to disclose LGBT identity to the colleague. Participants noted perceiving colleagues' religiosity or conservative political beliefs as red flags. For example, a participant stated:

I had a few friends there [in training] that I got to know pretty well, but I knew a couple of them had some pretty strong religious backgrounds and I did not really feel like testing the waters at that point. I did not know where I was going, who I was going to be working with next, so just kind of kept my nose, again, to the grindstone and pushed through the training (gay, male, Army, P36).

This participant developed friendships while in training, getting to know his colleagues "pretty well"; however, their religiosity communicated that disclosing his sexual orientation could threaten their perception of him. Another participant stated he was hesitant to disclose that he was transgender to his coworkers because "people have their religious views... they come from small backgrounds" (Pansexual, transmale, Army, P40). A transgender service member stated he observes coworkers' disclosure about their own opinions and if "somebody... doesn't seem overly religious or anti-LGBT, then I'll say I'm a transgender man and explain what that means" (asexual, transmale, Marines, P34). One participant stated that before she came out as a lesbian to members of her unit, she got along well with the older members; after coming out, she reported being "shunned" which she perceived as being due to their "Bible-stomping beliefs" (lesbian, female, Army, P41). This participant requested to change units due to this treatment and carried the lesson that it may not be safe to disclose to older or religious individuals in her future units.

Other participants noted that older age or higher rank was perceived as a red flag in regard to fellow military members who they did not know well. For example, one individual stated he was seen for a sexual health concern by a "gruff, grumpy, old" doctor who he had not previously seen. The curt manner in which the doctor performed his interview and exam of the participant communicated to this participant that he may not be safe to disclose the specific nature of his symptoms and that they were related to sexual intimacy with a man (male, gay, Navy, P16). One participant noted that older, higher-ranking personnel "grew up in the same Navy I did" and that

in general she is hesitant to disclose to anyone who served under DADT (female, lesbian, Navy, P7). Some service members stated that they observe conversations about related topics among coworkers to gauge for cues. Participants also noted coworkers communicating “ignorant” views about LGBT people in general, in which negative stereotypes were believed as fact, being reluctant to talk about LGBT issues at all, and being against women serving in combat roles as red flags to their own LGBT disclosure.

Spotting Green and White Flags One in four (27%) of participants noted cues of acceptance or neutrality from colleagues influencing their disclosure decision-making. Colleagues coming out as LGBT to study participants, observing other LGBT service members being out and accepted in the unit, and colleagues vocally supporting LGBT rights are seen as cues of outright acceptance and green flags for disclosure. Several participants noted that another service member coming out to them as LGBT was perceived as a green flag for their own disclosure. Other service members being out and accepted in the unit was also seen as an acceptance cue impacting disclosure decision-making.

Some participants referenced “shortcuts” or “rules” that they used in disclosure decision-making. For them, certain traits became associated with cues of acceptance, and when a coworker had that trait, the participant perceived a certain cue of acceptance or rejection. For example, one participant stated that he is more inclined to be out to officers than enlisted service members, referencing the educational gap that can exist between officer and enlisted personnel, “People with more college education tend to have that higher level of tolerance and acceptance of it [LGBT issues]” (gay, male, Army, P22). It is worth noting that this participant had been both enlisted and an officer; he had created a “rule” for himself in disclosure decision-making, viewing officers as inherently safer. Another participant viewed a generational divide in LGBT acceptance: “I feel like the generation of the Air Force is getting younger, so people are coming in more open-minded and those very opinionated people are getting out [separating from the military]” (gay, male, Air Force, P12). For this participant, younger age was perceived as a green flag for disclosure.

Similar to green flags, white flags can communicate safety disclosing LGBT identity. They differ from green flags in that they communicate to the service member that sexual or gender minority identity is judged neither negatively nor positively by the individual. Some participants may observe a white flag and choose not to disclose, preferring more overt green flags of LGBT acceptance. Some white flags include a conditional nature of acceptance such that LGBT identity is not problematic unless unrelated flaws are observed. As one participant stated: “All he [coworker] cares about is whether or not we can do our jobs...I think he

pretty much echoed everyone else’s feeling about being gay. As long as we are doing our job, it’s totally fine” (gay, male, Air Force, P28).

Individual

A majority (70%) of participants noted individual-level factors in their LGBT disclosure decision-making in the military workplace. These participants noted concern over the burdens associated with “coming out” as a minority in some way and questioning the relevance of coming out as LGBT at work as barriers to disclosure. Some participants stated that outness gave them a sense of strength and was a service to other LGBT individuals who may benefit from their outness. Some participants stated that being out in their civilian community affirmed their identity and made their concealment at work tolerable.

Burden of Being Different One in three (32%) participants noted feeling burdened by their “differentness,” such that extra steps and energy are needed to accomplish tasks that would not be required for non-LGBT service members. Some participants noted the need to disclose their LGBT identity to military colleagues at times or in ways that were forced. For example, prior to the Supreme Court ruling in 2015 requiring all US states to perform and recognize same-sex marriages, some service members had to request leave in order to travel to a state that would allow them to marry their same-sex partner. Some participants noted this required them to disclose their LGBT identity to their Commander when they would not otherwise have done so. One participant noted:

I had just never had to discuss it [being gay], I think, in a formal setting...I think it caught him [Commander] off guard, too, because he had never had to probably address the rules on making sure that a gay person was given the benefits of traveling when they needed to get married... he just kind of sat back in his chair and thought ‘Well, okay. I’ll figure this out for you.’ But I could tell that he understood the frustration that I had to deal with because I had to come to discuss it with him (gay, male, Air Force, P1).

It should be noted that this participant was pleased by his Commander’s reaction to his question; he felt that his Commander accepted him as a gay service member, and he was appropriately aided by his Commander in his request to travel to another state.

Some participants noted that accessing sexual health counseling or certain medications from their medical providers required the added burdens of them evaluating acceptance cues, educating their providers, and in some cases

seeking medical care off base. The burden of educating others, as well as handling their questions and emotional reactions to one's disclosure, was noted by several participants. As one transgender woman stated, "It's just like, it takes a lot of energy to handle people's reactions [to coming out as transgender]" (bisexual, transfemale, Army, P3). One participant who was a mental health professional noted that he was referred every patient who presented to the clinic who disclosed they were LGBT: "Like I'm the token homo shrink" (gay, male, Air Force, P2). Such experiences highlight aftereffects of disclosure to fellow service members that may impact their decision-making in the future. One participant stated that after disclosing he was transgender to his coworkers, he found that not only was he educating his colleagues on "transgender issues" but that he was serving as a representative for other transgender service members. As a representative, he felt pressure to prove how "normal" transgender people are (straight, transmale, Navy, P18). One service member stated that he perceived pressure to "fit in" in the military, and that disclosing his bisexuality to coworkers threatened his standing as "normal":

I definitely felt more like I was swimming against the stream. Like, in the military there's this idea that you do not want to stand out at all, like you want to blend in with the walls. You want to seem like everyone else. You want to be like interchangeable with other people. You do not want to stand out because you do not want to be a candidate for punishment or just seen as having discrepancies about you (bisexual, male, Air Force, P21).

For these participants, LGBT disclosure in the military conferred the burden of being seen as the expert on LGBT issues, required additional steps in order to receive the same benefits provided to non-LGBT service members, and the pressure to show that, despite being LGBT, they were "still normal." Assessing these burdens as "worth it" may vary by service member and situation, working in concert with institutional and interpersonal factors. Some service members may offset such burdens with coping mechanisms that make disclosure worthwhile. Several participants noted that one way to do that was by seeing their outness as an altruistic decision or as a personal strength.

Outness in the Workplace Benefitting Others or as a Personal Strength Nearly half (41%) of participants reported that they viewed their disclosure decision-making through the lens of improving the lives of other LGBT service members or acknowledging the psychological benefits of presenting as their authentic selves. Referring to the 2016 terror attack on a nightclub in Orlando, Florida frequented by gay males, one participant stated:

When that Orlando attack happened, that was kind of a big deal. I'm like well, the best way to keep people from being homophobic is to have them have someone that they know and respect, who is gay. So, I have decided that it would be a conscious decision where I would actually mention that stuff in class, just sort of in passing, especially at this sort of hypermasculine culture at the [Naval] Academy (gay, male, Navy, P16).

For this participant, he viewed his disclosure as a chance to protect against violence in the greater society, as well as presenting his authentic self at the Naval Academy, where he perceived a hypermasculine norm.

For some participants, disclosure to coworkers was worth the fear and uncertainty they may have felt. One participant stated: "As I keep going, the better I get at it [disclosing]...But I've had this idea for fearlessly being myself, right? And I just need to remember that I should just fearlessly be myself" (lesbian, female, Navy, P30). A transgender participant noted that she did not want her colleagues to "continue thinking false things about me" in reference to her motivation to disclose her gender identity (bisexual, transfemale, Army, P3). This aversion to misleading others was noted by another participant:

My wife and I are able to enjoy all the benefits that any other military family can enjoy and I just feel like being able to be more transparent is better. You feel more like you are a part of a team than the person with the dirty secret (lesbian, female, Army, P42).

For this service member, keeping her identity a secret from coworkers facilitated its "dirtiness," while outness empowered her and neutralized the information. For these participants, disclosure was viewed as an important step in building healthy relationships with coworkers. They noted that to serve with integrity and as a member of the team meant presenting as their authentic selves. One participant connected the experience of being respected by coworkers in his gender identity with his workplace performance:

All I can say as a final word is that I hope that with the data that you get from not only me but from all the other service members, I hope that the Department of Defense and just everybody in general can see that we want to stay. We want to do our job. Some of us love doing our job. Just even simply being recognized by our right pronoun, it makes our day. Or when someone refers to me by the male pronoun, it completely makes my day. It brightens up my day and I just work harder, I work happier. I work with a smile. And I think it just makes

more sense that you would want happy workers, happy service members doing their job (pansexual, transmale, Army, P29).

Questioning Relevance/Appropriateness of Discussing LGBT Identity in the Workplace One in five (19%) participants reported they assessed the relevance or appropriateness of discussing their LGBT identity in a military workplace setting prior to disclosure. These participants noted that they were concerned with presenting as “professional” and worried that commenting on their personal lives threatened their professional presentation. As one participant noted about LGBT identity, “Just the topic in general, who you like to have sex with and who you love, is just kind of awkward in nature” (straight, transmale, Marines, P35). Another participant stated that he is “reserved” about disclosure, “in the way that all people should be reserved in how they’re romantic” (gay, male, Navy, P26). One participant stated that he viewed disclosing his sexual orientation as aligning him with a “social change” movement, which is inconsistent with how he views himself in the workplace. This participant witnessed an anti-LGBT comment from a coworker and weighed his possible responses. On one hand, he felt compelled to disclose his sexual orientation to the individual who made the comment in order to confront and possibly amend her views. On the other hand, he recognized that she was a high-ranking official in the unit, that confronting her may upset his own career advancement, and concluded:

It is more important for me to be more of a closed book in the office than an open book, just from a professional standpoint, for a number of reasons, but mostly because I do not see myself as a person jockeying for social change in the workplace, and I do not think that’s my place (gay, male, Air Force, P25).

It may be the case that the presence of LGBT topics in political spaces dissuades some from aligning with LGBT topics in general. While some may define professionalism as vocally upholding institutional policy that promotes LGBT inclusion, he determined it was “not his place” to address the anti-LGBT comment made by a higher-ranking colleague.

Some LGBT service members referenced their time serving under DADT, noting that they were forced to de-prioritize this aspect of themselves for so long, internalizing its irrelevance and inappropriateness at work, now they have trouble re-prioritizing it. For some service members in a committed relationship, while it felt natural to have a picture of their significant other as the background image on their cell phone, or a photo on their desk, for example, they worried that a coworker would view this as a political statement. One

participant stated that, while taking part in an LGBT Pride Parade with other service members, he felt:

a little bit uncomfortable because it’s like well, how do we be political, how do we be sexual in a way that does not somehow [pause] how do we mix these two things? Like, what’s asked of us as young people in the LGBT rights or political movement...and then what’s asked of us in the military and how do we bridge that divide? (male, gay, Navy, P26).

Outness Outside the Military as a Strength One in 10 (11%) participants noted that their outness outside of the military provided a sense of strength that offset the challenges of being out in the military. A transgender Marine noted that while he could not yet present as male in his military community, he was able to be out in his non-military community, and others respected his gender identity.

I just got so fed up, that I was living a double life, like, you know, being out here, it was great because people knew that hey, I go by *he, him, his*. People knew that I was transgender, knew not to refer to me as *she*. But the thing is it was a different story at work. So, it’s like I was living a double life. Here I’m being this female Marine but then outside of work, I’m being *him*, the person I know that I am, the man that I am (straight, transmale, Marines, P35).

Another transmale stated that he was able to be “out” in the civilian community while stationed internationally. Due to gender presentation differences and the community’s limited interactions with Americans, this service member was able to present and introduce himself authentically while off duty. “That’s when I started dressing as myself on my free time, I would be up there, and I was comfortable. I lived as myself, and I was fine” (straight, transmale, Navy, P18). Similarly, a straight transmale and a bisexual female stated that being stationed in a progressive state allowed them to be out in their “off time;” while stressful to live differently on and off duty, they appreciated feeling safe to be out at least part of the time.

Discussion

This first-of-its-kind qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews of LGBT active duty service members across all military branches found that institutional, interpersonal, and individual-level factors influence their disclosure decision-making. Despite repeal of both DADT (2010/2011) and the transgender ban (2016), most participants cautiously

evaluated their military environment for cues of safety prior to disclosure, fearing that anti-LGBT sentiment lingers. Further, this study found that many LGBT service members worry that unspoken norms, or military culture, lag behind verbalized expectations or military policy. Just as LGBT bans did not seamlessly serve their purposes of keeping LGBT individuals from serving or disclosing their LGBT identity in the military, findings from the current study indicate that repeal of these bans does not seamlessly allow full, unlimited disclosure (Moradi, 2009; Parco, Levy, & Spears, 2015). Such findings suggest that if the expectation of DADT repeal was that LGB service members “would no longer...be asked...to look over their shoulder, in order to serve the country that they love” (Obama, 2010), a gap between DADT repeal and LGB service members’ lived experiences exists.

Consistent with MST, one’s perception of anti-LGBT stigma in the greater society impacted LGBT service members’ disclosure decisions. Witnessing anti-LGBT sentiment that went unchecked fostered a sense that individual anti-LGBT beliefs may persist despite policy change. This study also found that social support, an individual sense of outness as strength, and outness as activism and altruism acted as coping mechanisms. MST indicates that such supports, which can be interpreted through the MST terminology of “valence” and “prominence” of one’s LGBT identity, will interact with anti-LGBT factors to influence one’s wellness (Meyer, 2003, p. 678). As discussed in MST literature, participants in this study noted that while de-prioritizing their LGBT identity at work was stressful, concealment was used strategically to accomplish goals such as career advancement or career security.

A prominent theory in Communication studies, communication privacy management (CPM) theory, is also helpful in understanding study results. CPM views self-disclosure of private information as inherently relational, with the “owner” of the information granting “access” to “co-owners” of that information (Petronio, 2002; Petronio, 2013). Self-disclosure, in this framework, involves an ongoing management of the private information in which the owner of the information gauges many factors such as situational needs, risk-benefit analyses, and cultural values (Petronio, 2002; Petronio, 2013). Study participants created “core criteria” which needed to be met, such as younger age, supportive LGBT political views, and lack of religiosity, for example, prior to disclosure. Some participants experienced a “catalyst” to disclosure such that they were pressured to disclose in order to access needed resources. Consistent with CPM, LGBT service members reported that they carefully manage their private information and thoughtfully select military coworkers to “co-own” their information. Using CPM terminology, it may be the case that service members develop “rules” for themselves in which they are open to disclosure, redrawing boundaries around their private information, as they gauge for catalyst criteria indicating

that this new boundary will be upheld. The current study found that, despite LGBT military ban repeals, LGBT service members do not necessarily trust all fellow service members to “co-own” this information.

Military-specific cultural norms may impact findings from the present study, such as the de-emphasis of individuality and the emphasis on teamwork and conformity in a military community. A Department of Defense memo released in support of DADT repeal echoes the common sentiment that sexual orientation is a “personal and private matter” (Stanley, 2011). While the sentiment was used in the memo’s context as a supportive argument for removing government regulation from a service member’s romantic life, such a statement may also deliver a complex message to sexual minorities. While a sentiment may intend to state that *sexuality* is a personal and private matter, one could argue that sexual *orientation*, separate from *sexuality*, is a demographic characteristic not unlike racial identity, age, or marital status. If a demographic trait is classified as “personal and private,” it may connote an underlying expectation of secrecy. This dilemma was expressed by those participants in the current study who worried that disclosure of their LGBT identity in the military workplace was not relevant or appropriate. Coupled with the often-repeated sentiment heard from coworkers that their sexual orientation or gender identity “does not matter” as long as they can accomplish their job, service members may feel ambivalent about whether to disclose. On top of this complex consideration, the military’s “warrior ethos” and “mission first” culture, which demands that service members place their personal needs after that of the military’s needs, may present an additional layer complicating LGBT disclosure decision-making (Riccio, Sullivan, Klein, Salter, & Kinnison, 2004). Further, a culture that is perceived to be permissive of anti-LGBT sentiment may encourage LGBT service members to conceal in order to protect themselves from violence from those who wish to assert their dominance in a competitive, hypermasculine workplace (Castro & Goldbach, 2018). The participant who stated, “you don’t want to stand out at all, like you want to blend in with the walls” (bisexual, male, Air Force, P21) highlighted this sense that there may be danger in transgressing the expectation of conformity.

As the authors expected, the present findings mirror the literature on LGBT disclosure in civilian workplaces. For example, King et al. (2017) found that institutional policies, climate, and partner cues of acceptance and rejection predicted disclosure of LGB workers in a civilian environment. Meanwhile, Wessel (2017) found that having a supportive coworker and accepting organizational policies were associated with disclosure for LGB workers. Finally, Velez, Moradi, and Brewster (2013) found that disclosure at work can work as a buffer for low, but not high, levels of discrimination at work and well-being. As such interactions were not explored in the present study, the complex

relationships between work-related variables and disclosure decisions should continue to be explored. Further, the present findings are consistent with past research on LGBT service members which found that DADT repeal did alleviate some of the stress associated with being an LGBT service member (Belkin et al., 2012; Biddix et al., 2013; Evans et al., 2018; Mount et al., 2015; Van Gilder, 2017). A survey conducted several months after DADT repeal found that half of LGB personnel had disclosed to more fellow service members following the repeal, and one in three reported being out to most or all of their unit (Belkin et al., 2012). However, lingering distrust was found in those studies as well; as noted in the Mount et al. (2015) paper regarding LB servicewomen's comfort accessing medical care, one participant stated "I know [DADT] has been repealed, but I'm not sure I trust the system yet" (p. 115). LGB service members surveyed in 2009, prior to DADT repeal, overwhelmingly reported (97%) that they use some concealing strategies in military settings (National Defense Research Institute, 2010). When asked if they *would* disclose in military settings should DADT be repealed, 74% said that they would disclose at least sometimes, with many reporting they would use a "wait and see" approach (National Defense Research Institute, 2010). The current study's finding that service members continue to assess their environment prior to disclosure is in line with this pre-DADT-repeal projected outness.

If military values (e.g., conformity, warrior ethos) and logistical factors (e.g., frequent moves, rank structure, limited confidentiality) are mandatory military workplace elements, what can be done to integrate LGBT service members beyond revocation of LGBT bans? The findings from this study offer a number of suggestions. For example, several participants mentioned the importance of having an openly LGBT role model who was higher ranking and had experienced military success, as evidence that being out is safe and will not negatively impact career progression. Others mentioned the subjectivity involved in the evaluation and promotion system, such that their career may be harmed under the guise of a non-LGBT-related reason. Several participants noted that disclosure of anti-LGBT religious beliefs communicated a "red flag" to LGBT disclosure. Some participants recalled experiences in which a unit leader either voiced anti-LGBT beliefs, or failed to hold another unit member accountable for voicing anti-LGBT beliefs, despite LGBT ban repeals. While in other contexts, the LGBT community may value a counter-culture presence, this was not communicated by LGBT service members in this study. One transgender individual communicated a sentiment that was alluded to by several LGBT participants: "We're normal. We're super normal" (straight, transmale, Navy, P18).

In sum, LGBT service members interviewed for this study advocated for an increase in openly LGBT higher-ranking service members at both the enlisted and officer levels, greater transparency in the career evaluation process, cultivation of

stronger community norms that statements of discrimination and bigotry will not be tolerated (even if these views are religion-based), and the freedom to define for themselves whether or not to emphasize their LGBT identity in the military workplace. From an administrative perspective, military officials may consider implementing clear guidance for unit leaders to communicate LGB-integrative language and sentiment in line with DADT repeal.

Further, it is important to note that transgender service members were likely compelled to disclose to at least to their Command and medical providers in order to access needed medical and administrative resources related to their gender identity. This may not be the case for cisgender LGB service members, as they do not have such reasons for disclosure. Additionally, due to the abrupt reinstatement of the ban on open transgender service, there may be a complex tension between transgender service member acceptance and existing policy. To avoid a problematic *ask, tell, pursue* mindset against currently-serving transgender members, à la the anti-LGB DADT policy, military officials may consider implementing policy that allows open service for those approximately 9000 individuals (Belkin & Mazur, 2018).

Future studies on this population may employ quantitative data analysis in order to explore the relationships between demographic factors such as rank and sexual orientation subgroup with workplace disclosure. Additionally, factors such as unit cohesion and social support may be assessed in relation to disclosure and LGBT climate. Also, as higher internalized homonegativity or transnegativity has been associated with lower outness, future studies should investigate to what extent these factors may be at play for LGBT service members (Gilmore, Rose, & Rubinstein, 2011; Rostosky & Riggle, 2002; Whitman & Nadal, 2015). Continued research on the acceptance and integration of LGBT service members will be helpful in assessing for changes over time. As the policies regarding transgender service have evolved, these service members' wellbeing must be monitored. Finally, consequences of LGBT disclosure on one's mental health, unit cohesion, work performance, and other factors may be helpful for researchers to explore in order to paint a more complete picture of LGBT service member health and design interventions to support their wellbeing.

Limitations

This study contains limitations that should be noted. While recruitment was conducted intentionally to incorporate LGBT service members from a variety of venues, it is possible that the sample is biased. It could be the case that the sample is comprised mostly of individuals who are more "out," as one of the main recruitment strategies involved reaching potential participants via LGBT military social media. Those who are not members of such social media groups may not be inclined to

select a link to a survey for LGBT service members no matter the venue. On the other hand, it may be the case that the sample is biased toward individuals who experience some form of stress related to their LGBT identity in the military, while those who are not preoccupied with such stressors do not feel compelled to partake in such a study. While this analysis had a relatively high number of participants for a qualitative study, the subsamples were not large enough to assess for differences by subgroups. Whether bisexual male service members experience different disclosure decision-making factors than gay male service members, for example, could not be assessed. Differences in disclosure decision-making by branch, sexual orientation, gender identity, race, etc. may be explored in future studies. Due to the timely policy shifts around transgender service members, the logistical needs of this group, and the unique societal stigma associated with transgender individuals, this group may warrant a research study specifically exploring their experience disclosing in a military context.

Conclusion

Efforts taken by the US government to allow for open LGBT service in the military have been acknowledged by the LGBT military community. However, these actions do not seem to be enough to fully eliminate the stigma felt by LGBT service members. Participants in the present study state that they continually assess the military climate and their coworkers for cues that it is safe to disclose their LGBT identity. Participants evaluate these factors as they weigh their own individual motivations to conceal or disclose. All participants noted that they have disclosed to some military colleagues and have concealed to others. The results indicate that, while open LGBT service reduced some stress for LGBT service members, the repeals have also created different disclosure burdens. Taken together, LGBT service members seek a military in which disclosure will not subject them to negative career repercussions, burden them with feelings of differentness or expectations to teach others how to treat them, limit their ability to access needed resources for themselves or their family, and, ultimately, that their physical and personal integrity will not be endangered. In an all-volunteer force, it makes logical sense that the estimated 74,000 actively serving LGBT personnel be permitted to serve their country without continued fear of reprisal for presenting as their authentic self. As it stands, many LGBT service members continue to fear that doing so exposes them as a “candidate for punishment.”

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

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