

Portraits of Resilience: Same-Sex Military Couples' Experience of Deployment

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## **Abstract**

Research investigating how same-sex military couples conjointly experience the deployment process is absent. This study employed transcendental phenomenological methods (Moustakas, 1994) to explore the lived experiences of same-sex military couples and the deployment process. In-depth, conjoint interviews were conducted with eighteen individuals: five female couples and four male couples, representing four military branches, Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps. Three thematic categories emerged that revealed the essence of the couples' experiences of deployment: deployment experience is context-dependent, challenges associated with sexual minority status, and learned resilience. Though couples experienced a host of unique challenges related to their minority status and restrictive policies, couples developed adaptive coping strategies that served to mediate the impact of distinctive barriers and restrictions. Findings demonstrate the vulnerability and resilience of same-sex military couples during deployment. Political, clinical, and research implications are discussed.

*Keywords:* same-sex, military, couples, deployment, phenomenology, resilience

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

### **The Problem and its Setting**

All couples undergo periods of change, conflict, separation, and stress, as these are, in fact, normative processes. Military couples, however, have a markedly different experience with regard to change, separation, and stress within the family system (Laser & Stephens, 2010). Military families often experience considerable stress and endure periods of prolonged separation when a loved one is deployed to a war zone –an experience that undoubtedly transforms the core of the family system. These criteria put unique demands on military families and on military marital and couple relationships in particular (Karney & Crown, 2007; Laser & Stephens, 2010).

Same-sex military couples encounter all of the same challenges as their heterosexual counterparts as well as numerous distinctive concerns due to the ongoing and unique challenges associated with their sexual minority status. The compounding and chronic stressors that accompany both military deployment and a minority status can have a profound effect on individuals and their relationships. Embedded within various social and institutional contexts that restrict their rights and access to resources, same-sex military couples represent both a vulnerable and resilient group.

Lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) persons have faced long-standing exclusion and institutional discrimination by the U. S. Military (Herek & Belkin, 2006) on the basis that “homosexuality is incompatible with military service” (DOD Directive 1332.14, January 28, 1982, Part 1, Section H). The most recent federal prohibition against open service, Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell (DADT) enacted in 1993, was designed to be more inclusive, as it afforded “closeted” LGB individuals to enlist in military service (Burks, 2011). Applicants and recruits would no

longer be screened for their sexual orientation, as sexuality would be considered a “personal and private matter” (DoD, 2010, p. 20). Therefore, personnel’s sexual orientation would be considered a ‘non-issue’ unless a service member demonstrated a ‘propensity’ to engage in homosexual conduct. Under DADT, individuals would be “separated from the armed forces” (DoD, 2010, p. 19), if a service member self-identified as homosexual, engaged in, attempted to engage in or solicit ‘homosexual acts’, or attempted to marry a person of the same biological sex (DoD, 2010). Since the enactment of DADT in 1993, there have been over 13,000 military personnel discharged on the basis of their sexual orientation, the majority of whom were male, enlisted service members (DoD, 2010).

The impact of DADT on LGB service members and their families has been significant and adverse. With a policy that mandated secrecy, LGB service members were effectively forced back ‘into the closet’ (Burks, 2011), and were often unable to share elements of their personal lives to unit members for fear of being discharged (Frank, 2004; 2010). Rather than preserving unit cohesion and camaraderie by making sexuality a ‘non-issue’, DADT served to inhibit trust and emotional closeness by requiring LGB service members to hide their identity (Frank, 2010; Trivette, 2010). The context of secrecy and caution within military settings can weigh heavily on the service member and may put gay and lesbian personnel at risk for blackmail or manipulation (RAND, 2010) and at greater risk for victimization (Burks, 2011). Burks (2011) suggests that LGB service members may be more hesitant to report harassment and victimization for fear of ‘outing’ themselves and being discharged. Indeed, many LGB service members (RAND, 2010) attributed a variety of mental health problems to DADT, indicating an adverse effect on personal relationships and relationships within their unit.

The relational impact of DADT on same-sex military couples is undeniable. While LGB service members were effectively forced into the proverbial closet, so too were their partners. Under DADT, LGB service members were unable to publicly reunite with their partners at homecoming events following deployment, name their partner as the recipient of a life insurance policy without inviting suspicion, and were restricted from access to medical, pay, housing and insurance survivor benefits for their committed same-sex partners (Wescott & Sawyer, 2007). Though the so-called ‘silent sacrifices’ of these military families are beginning to garner increasing attention in recent years, the true extent of these sacrifices remains unknown (Wescott & Sawyer, 2007).

The stigmatized minority status of LGB service members and their partners can have significant and chronic implications on both the individual’s mental health and their interpersonal relationships (Meyer, 1995; Meyer, 2003; Mohr & Daly, 2008; Otis, 2006). While minority stress is significant for many marginalized or disadvantaged groups, it is perhaps more complex for persons with a concealable stigma, or those who are ‘closeted’, with regard to their ability/decision to disclose. Pachankis (2007) posits that the ever-present threat of discovery weighs heavily on those with a concealable stigma, such as one’s non-heterosexual status, especially in environments such as the military in which the discovery of one’s sexual minority status can have life-altering consequences. Moreover, efforts made to hide one’s concealable stigma can have a variety of cognitive, affective, and behavioral implications including preoccupation with one’s stigma, vigilance surrounding discovery, anxiety, depression, guilt, shame, social avoidance and isolation, and impaired interpersonal relationship functioning (Pachankis, 2007). Conversely, disclosure of one’s sexual orientation is associated with a

number of positive outcomes including enhanced well-being, higher-quality interpersonal relationships, and better mental health (RAND, 2010).

A concept particularly salient to LGB service members and their partners is that of minority stress (Meyer, 1995; Meyer, 2003). Minority stress refers to chronic stressors that LGB individuals experience as a result of their disenfranchised minority status (Meyer, 1995). These chronic and often compounding stressors place minority populations at a greater risk for psychological distress and poor mental health outcomes (Meyer, 1995; 2003). Meyer (1995) posits three processes of minority stress specific to the LGB population including: “internalized homophobia, expectations of rejection and discrimination (perceived stigma), and actual prejudice events” (p. 40). These three domains were found to significantly predict psychological distress in gay men (Meyer, 1995). The aforementioned processes have also been found to negatively impact same-sex couple relationships (Balsam & Szymanski, 2005; Mohr & Daly, 2008; Otis, Rostosky, Riggle, & Harmin, 2006).

However, Meyer (2003) also emphasizes the resilience of minority group members and asserts that cohesiveness and group solidarity may become protective factors in the ability to cope with the unique stressors that accompany a minority status. The support garnered from friends and other LGB identifying individuals is considered to be one of the ways in which LGB persons compensate for the lack of familial and institutional support (Kurdek, 2005). LGB service members may have fewer opportunities to access these networks due to the potential consequences of disclosing their sexual orientation. Remarkably, Trivette (2010) found that some gay and lesbian personnel were able to access and establish covert networks with other LGB service members despite the consequences of affiliation and identification under DADT policy. Through this ‘underground network’ of gay and lesbian military personnel, LGB service

members were able to draw on the support of one another to process their experience of being a sexual minority in an environment that was hostile and exclusive (Trivette, 2010). Additionally, this support network enabled some LGB personnel to redefine and integrate their sexual and military identities.

In the years since DADT was enacted, there has been a gradual shift towards acceptance and a push for LGB rights both among the American public (Carlson, 2003; RAND, 2010) and amongst military personnel (Jacobs, 2005; Moradi & Miller, 2009). A survey released by the Department of Defense (DOD) in 2010 indicated that approximately 70% of personnel surveyed felt that repealing the policy would not hinder unit readiness. It seems as though LGB service members also sensed the changing social climate, as anonymous surveys conducted prior to DADT's repeal indicated that some LGB service members were 'out' in some capacity to their unit, and felt their unit was relatively accepting (RAND, 2010).

Recent policy reform reflects this societal shift in acceptance. With the repeal of DADT in September of 2011, lesbian, gay and bisexual service members are now able to serve openly for the first time without fear of being discharged from the military. 2013 also marked significant achievements for the gay rights movement, as the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) was struck down, allowing legally married same-sex couples to receive federal recognition, and thus receive military dependent benefits. However, while recent years have marked significant gains for LGB service members with the repeal of DADT and DOMA, there will continue to be discrepancies in access to resources and uncertainty around federal recognition until LGB couples can marry in every state in the nation.

Though DOMA was struck down in 2013, a brief discussion of its impact on same-sex military couples is warranted. DOMA had a tremendous impact on LGB service members and

their families. Under DOMA, marriage was defined as “a legal union between one man and one woman (<http://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/marriage>). Further, because individual states were granted jurisdiction regarding marriage law, they were not required to recognize a same-sex marriage of another state (<http://www.law.cornell.edu/wex/marriage>). Therefore, regardless of the level of commitment of same-sex partners—marriage, civil union, domestic partnership, etc.—the U.S military was prohibited from granting dependent benefits to committed same-sex couples (Dolan & Biggs, 2012).

DOMA significantly impaired the family readiness of LGB personnel and their families by denying committed same-sex couples military dependent status, thereby restricting their access to a number of necessary benefits and resources including health care, on-base support activities, survivor benefits, educational benefits, housing allowances, etc. (Dolan & Biggs, 2012). Aforementioned benefits and support services are essential to ensuring the ‘family readiness’ of military families and “play a key role in helping service members and their families through deployment-related stressors,” (Dolan & Biggs, 2012, p. 24). The lack of resources and equal benefits may have thus become particularly salient as same-sex military couples prepared for deployment as partners may not have had access to Family Readiness Groups, support groups for spouses, and cannot receive Survivor Benefits, as they were not considered dependents due to DOMA’s definition of a spouse (Dolan & Biggs, 2012). Taken together, DADT and DOMA likely exacerbated deployment related stressors for same-sex military couples during OEF and OIF.

The Global War on Terror, initiated in 2001, was the first major military operation since the ratification of DADT in 1993. The war on terror heightened the operational tempo and increased the number of deployments per service member to an unprecedented level (Duckworth,

2009; Karney & Crown, 2007). Hence, the deployment cycle revolved more quickly as many units returning from Afghanistan and/or Iraq often received deployment orders again within six months of redeployment (Duckworth, 2009). These increased demands on service members put additional strain on military couples, as partners had less time to prepare for deployment and to readjust upon the service member's return (Baptist et al. 2011; Duckworth, 2009; Karney & Crown, 2007; Laser & Stephens, 2010).

Couples often experience relational distress and a host of other unpleasant psychological symptoms throughout the deployment cycle, which consists of three major phases: pre-deployment, deployment, and redeployment (Laser & Stephens, 2010; Pincus et al. 2008). McLeland and Sutton (2005) found that male service member's relationship satisfaction decreased considerably merely by receiving deployment orders. Similarly, female partners often experience an increase in anxiety surrounding the relationship prior to their spouses' departure (Baptist et al. 2011). The relational distress continues throughout all phases of deployment during which both partners are likely to experience heightened anxiety, emotional disorganization, loss, emptiness, and loneliness, while service members' partners or spouses are more likely to feel a sense of abandonment and loss (Laser & Stephens, 2010; Pincus et al. 2008; Sneath & Rheem, 2011). The reunification period is also particularly stressful for military couples as they must adjust to the changes and challenges brought on by the deployment process (Baptist et al. 2011). Spouses and partners of service members may be especially sensitive to reintegration difficulties. Nelson Goff, Crow, Reisbig, and Hamilton (2007) assert that it is often "those most emotionally connected to the soldiers" (p. 352) who are most impacted by the potential trauma following deployment. It is not uncommon for returning veterans to report relational distress for the first twelve months post-deployment (Hoge, Castro, & Eaton, 2006).

A growing body of research suggests that the similarities between same-sex couples and heterosexual couples offset the differences (Kurdek, 2005). Further, like many opposite-sex couples, lesbians, gay men and bisexuals have often identified their intimate partners as a primary source of emotional and social support (Kurdek, 1988). Thus, it is fair to infer that committed same-sex couples face a similar relational experience during the deployment process. However, given their status as a stigmatized minority group and limited access to resources that aid in family readiness, committed same-sex military couples face additional stressors and challenges throughout military deployment. The silent sacrifices of these modern military couples and families have yet to be explored empirically.

### **Significance**

Recent estimates of the number of LGB identifying personnel range from 66,000 to 78,000 (Frank, 2010; RAND, 2010), accounting for approximately 3.7% of all military personnel, active duty or otherwise (RAND, 2010). However, these numbers are likely underestimated due to the prevailing heterosexism and previously mandated secrecy within military culture. Given the prior federal prohibitions against open service, it is unknown how many LGB service members deployed during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OEF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). Nevertheless, it is likely that a significant number of LGB identifying military personnel were deployed to Iraq and/or Afghanistan given the increase in number of deployments per service member and heightened operational tempo of said engagements (Duckworth, 2009; Karney & Crown, 2007). Since LGB personnel are estimated to be serving at rates comparable to their numbers in the civilian population (RAND, 2010), it is fair to infer that rates of committed same-sex military relationships are similar to those of the civilian population (Herek et al., 2010). It is therefore likely that a significant number of deployed LGB veterans were in

committed relationships throughout the deployment process.

Despite the recent surge of media and political attention surrounding sexual minorities and military service, there is a significant lack of empirical, peer-reviewed research on LGB service members (Cochran et al., 2013). At present, the majority of existing literature on the experiences of LGB service members has been either anecdotal in the form of personal accounts or executive and/or technical reports conducted by task forces and federal agencies (Burks, 2011). The paucity of literature is likely due in large part to the history of exclusion and prohibitive regulations against LGB members of the military (Burks, 2011). Further, Burks (2011) posits that the notion of “not asking” and “not telling” may have become embedded in military ideology and may further impede same-sex service members and their families from sharing their experiences despite the recent repeal of DADT in 2011. Conversely, some committed same-sex couples may be more willing to share their experiences in efforts to advocate for their right to receive federal recognition as military spouses.

While there are a few research studies that explore the experience of lesbian and gay service members during deployment (Frank, 2004), research investigating this experience from the perspective of committed same-sex couples is virtually nonexistent. This study, in exploring the relational experience of the deployment process for same-sex military couples, accounts for the notable gap in literature and provides a rich and detailed understanding of the lived experiences of these individuals. As LGB service members are now able to serve our country openly, it is imperative to gain a better understanding of their unique experiences, strengths and challenges so as to better serve this population. Further, with the recent repeal of DADT and DOMA, this study should be of particular interest to couple and family therapists, as more same-sex military couples and their families may seek mental health services. On a broader level, this

study should also be of interest to policymakers and military officials, as many committed same-sex military couples stationed in jurisdictions that do not permit same-sex marriage are still unable to receive military dependent benefits.

### **Rationale**

This study employed qualitative methods for a number of reasons. The author was unable to find an empirical study exploring how same-sex military couples conjointly experience the deployment process. In using qualitative methodology, the author sought to provide an in-depth account of the lived experiences of the deployment process while accounting for the profound lack of literature exploring this phenomenon from the same-sex couples' perspective. Interviewing couples conjointly allowed for participants to reflect on the relational aspects of their deployment experience, thereby explicating the essence of the couple's experience as a whole. Further, the use of a phenomenological approach provided a compelling opportunity to hear previously "silenced voices," (Creswell, 2007, p. 40) by empowering participants to use their own voices to share their experiences. Examining the research questions in this way was, in fact, the only way to derive a rich description and deeply understand the common lived experience of these couples.

### **Theoretical Framework**

A transcendental phenomenological framework (Moustakas, 1994) was selected to guide the author's conceptualization and exploration in the present study. This approach enabled the researcher to explicate the overall essence of the common lived experiences of the deployment process while allowing participant couples to use their own voices to define their experience. Phenomenology also underscores the importance of understanding the system's experience as a 'whole' (Dahl & Boss, 2005, p. 66) when gathering data on families and couples. The use of a

phenomenological lens allowed participants to provide an in-depth account of the how participant couples conjointly experienced deployment process and the way in which they co-created meaning of this experience.

Moustakas' (1994) transcendental approach maintains the central tenets of human science research including the value of the human experience, a focus on the totality of experience, a search for essences and meanings, etc. However, a distinctive feature in the transcendental approach is the "epoche" process, which serves to "launch" (p. 22) the study into a transcendental perspective. Through the epoche process, the researcher engages in extensive and ongoing efforts to set aside prior experiences with and presuppositions about the phenomena of study in an effort to perceive the phenomena of study "freshly, as if for the first time" (p. 34). The epoche is therefore fundamental to the research process due to the subjectivity inherent in human science research.

Relatedly, a fundamental philosophical assumption underlying phenomenological inquiry is that truth is socially constructed and therefore inherently relative rather than objective (Dahl & Boss, 2005). Thus experiences, such as military deployment, can have an array of different meanings to different individuals and/or couples (Dahl & Boss, 2005). Rather than generalization to a broader population, the purpose of phenomenological inquiry is to derive an accurate understanding of the description and constructed meanings of the common lived experiences of participants (Dahl & Boss, 2005). Such inquiry should therefore occur where the phenomenon naturally exists and from the actor's own perspective (Dahl & Boss, 2005). This study used in-depth, semi-structured interviews to explore how participant couples experienced the deployment process.

Another philosophical tenet central to phenomenology is that as researchers, we are not separate from the phenomenon of interest (Dahl & Boss, 2005) in that our previous life experiences, values, beliefs, etc. influence our inquiry and interpretation of data. Moustakas (1994) asserts that the researcher first gather a full description of his or her personal experience with the phenomenon of interest prior to analyzing the results of the “co-researchers” or participants, through bracketing. The researcher has personal experience as the spouse of a deployed service member. In order to fully capture the essence of participant couples’ experiences, the author engaged in extensive bracketing throughout all phases of the study to make explicit her previous experiences with and beliefs about the deployment process. This ongoing process of self-reflection afforded a more thoughtful immersion into the participants’ realities and experiences.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Existing research provides a general understanding of the heterosexual couple’s experience of the deployment process as well as the relational impact of minority stress on same-sex couples. Research investigating the experience of same-sex military couples during the deployment process is absent. The primary purpose of this phenomenological study was to fill a gap in the present literature by exploring how LGB service members and their partners conjointly experienced the deployment process during OEF and OIF, and how they made meaning of their “silent sacrifices” (Wescott & Sawyer, 2007). Therefore, this study addressed the following research question: How do same-sex military couples experience the deployment process?

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

An exploration of various aspects and contexts pertinent to same-sex military couples is necessary to fully understand the context and scope of the present study. An overview of the current literature on same-sex couples will be presented to assist in understanding the population of interest. It is also essential to explore the minority stress factors and processes unique to lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals. Further, it is important to explore the dyadic and relational impacts of chronic minority stress for same-sex couples. Doing so aids in understanding the ways in which a military context may exacerbate said minority stress experiences for same-sex military couples. It is also essential to examine the dominant discourses within military culture and how they have impacted the military's approach to lesbians, gay men and bisexuals. Doing so will illuminate ways in which the social-occupational context of the military may be particularly stressful for LGB personnel and their partners. Additionally, it is imperative to explore the existing research, though limited, on lesbian, gay and bisexual service members in the armed forces. Finally, literature on the relational impact of the deployment process will be reviewed.

### **Same-Sex Couples**

An exploration of the existing literature on same-sex couples is necessary to better understand the population of interest in the present study. Understanding the size of the self-identified LGB population is a complex task. Due to the stigma associated with being a sexual minority and the methodological difficulties in obtaining representative samples, there is a lack of definitive data on the number of lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals in America. However, based on a growing number of population-based surveys, Gary Gates, a distinguished scholar of the Williams Institute, estimates that there are approximately nine million self-identifying lesbian,

gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) Americans, constituting roughly of 3.5% of adults in the United States (2011). Of the adults who identify as LGB, there are slightly more self-reported bisexuals, 1.8%, than those who identify as gay or lesbian, 1.7% (Gates, 2011).

The difficulty of deriving definitive data of LGB individuals continues when one considers estimating the prevalence of committed same-sex relationships. The 2010 Census marked the first time that same-sex couple households were able to indicate whether they were living together as spouses or as unmarried partners. According to data from the 2010 Census, there are an estimated 646,464 same-sex households in the United States, of which approximately one-fifth reported as spousal households (O'Connell & Feliz, 2011). Census data also shows an increase of 52% in the number of same-sex households in the last decade (O'Connell & Feliz, 2011). However, it is unclear the true extent of growth in this population as the observed increase may be due to an increase in reporting rather than an increase in the actual number of same-sex couples.

The findings of a survey conducted in 2005 from a national probability sample of self-identifying LGB individuals provided population parameter estimates for an array of demographic, social and psychological variables (Herek, Norton, Allen, Sims, 2010). Based on the results of the 662 respondents, it is estimated that approximately 40 percent of gay men and 76 percent of lesbian women are in committed same-sex relationships. Among those in a same-sex relationship, about 21 percent of gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals are living with, married, or in a civil union or domestic partnership with their partner. Additionally, a large percentage of those surveyed reported that they would marry their partner if they were afforded the right to marry. This sentiment was especially evident among lesbian respondents.

A growing body of research suggests that the similarities between same-sex couples and heterosexual couples tend to outweigh the differences (Kurdek, 2005). As noted previously, same-sex partners often consider their partner a primary source of emotional support, as do opposite-sex partners (Kurdek, 1988). Lesbian and gay couples are also likely to experience similar levels of satisfaction in their intimate relationships as heterosexual couples (Kurdek, 2005). Research shows that same-sex couples are more likely to value an equal distribution of power (Kurdek, 2005) and an egalitarian relationship (Peplau & Spalding, 2000). Unlike heterosexual couples, same-sex partners are more likely to name friends as supporters rather than family members (Bryant & Demian, 1994; Kurdek, 2005), as support from relatives is often lacking (Granvold & Martin, 1999). The lack of familial support for the relationship is considered by many to be a unique stressor for same-sex couples, however the support garnered from supportive friends and other LGB identifying individuals is considered to be one of the ways in which same-sex couples compensate for the lack of familial and institutional support (Kurdek, 2005).

While there are many similarities between same-sex and heterosexual couples, same-sex partners face several challenges and processes unique to their sexual minority status. The principal issues distinguishing the experience of same-sex couples from opposite-sex couples are the pervasive heterosexism and gender role socialization in American society, which serve to socially oppress LGB individuals and their families (Connolly, 2004). Same-sex couples are thus tasked with forging intimate relationships in a social and political context that regularly and systematically invalidates their relationships (Connolly, 2004; Rostosky, Riggle, Gray, & Hatton, 2007).

A survey conducted by Bryant and Demian (1994) revealed just how pervasive discriminatory experiences are for same-sex couples. The survey included results from 1,266 same-sex couples, 706 lesbian couples and 560 male couples. The average length of the relationship was approximately six years, however over 100 couples had been together for 15 years or more. Findings indicate that over 70 percent of the respondents had experienced at least one type of relationship discrimination through employment benefits, housing, taxes, insurance, adoption, hospital visitation, etc. Consistent with previous research, participant couples reported low levels of familial support, but high levels of support from well-established networks of friends and other LGBT identifying individuals. Further, respondents ranked their relatives as one of the top three stressors in their relationships along with sex and finances.

Their sexual minority status presents same-sex couples with unique challenges particularly regarding creating and expressing commitment in social and political contexts (Rostosky, Riggle, Dudley, & Wright, 2006). Rostosky et al. (2006) sought to explore relational commitment through the lived experiences of same-sex couples in a qualitative study. The study sample included 14 dyads, 7 male couples and 7 female couples, recruited from a larger study of same-sex relationships. Participant couples had been together for an average of 6.4 years, thus indicating a high level of commitment. Each partner participated in individual interviews and completed a questionnaire, which elicited information regarding demographics, relationship quality, perceived social support, psychological adjustment, and religiosity. Each couple was then videotaped as they privately responded to and discussed a series of open-ended questions regarding their relationship and the meaning of commitment. These videotaped conversations were the primary foci of analyses for the study. Qualitative analysis revealed seven domains or themes regarding how participant couples experienced and made sense of commitment including

perceived costs, benefits, investments, intra-couple differences, rewards, sexual boundaries and personal/relationship values and ideas. With regard to costs of commitment, many couples specifically discussed legal and societal restraints as costs to being in a committed same-sex relationship. Couples also reported a hesitancy to be open about their relationships due to anticipated social disapproval. This sometimes led to a sense of isolation and lack of support for participants. A commitment to the relationship was demonstrated by partners' willingness to deal with negative reactions and to disclose their relationship in spite of the actual or perceived reactions. Consistent with previous research, participants perceived their friendship network with others in the gay community as a great benefit to their relationship. Comparatively, participant couples consistently viewed their relationship as quite positive and desirable in relation to others they had observed.

### **Minority Stress**

As noted previously, LGB individuals face various distinctive processes and stressors due to their long-standing cultural oppression and discrimination. Central to the experience of these unique stressors is the concept of minority stress. Minority stress refers to the additive and chronic social stress that stigmatized persons face due to their “culturally sanctioned, categorically ascribed inferior status, social prejudice, and discrimination,” (Brooks, 1981, p. 107). This conceptual model is a framework for understanding how a stigmatizing social context can adversely impact the psychosocial well-being of minority group members.

Meyer (1995; 2003; 2007) expanded upon Brooks (1981) model of minority stress and developed a conceptual framework specific to lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals. A minority stress orientation posits that sexual prejudice and heterosexism in society is chronically and uniquely stressful, placing sexual minorities at a greater risk for poor mental health outcomes.

The social environment affects the health and adjustment of LGB persons in both direct and indirect, but pervasive ways (Meyer, 2007).

There are five factors of the minority stress model as applied to sexual minorities: (a) experiences of discrimination, (b) anticipated rejection, (c) concealing one's sexual orientation, (d) internalized homophobia, or internalization of negative societal attitudes and (e) adaptive coping strategies (Meyer, 2003). These factors and their impact on sexual minorities have been studied in an array of contexts (Rostosky et al. 2007). Of particular interest to the present study are the impact of minority stress on the psychological well-being of the LGB individual and the experiences of sexual minority stress in the workplace.

Meyer (1995) explored the effect of three minority stress factors--internalized homophobia, stigma, and experiences of discrimination and violence (prejudice)--on psychological distress in a sample of 741 adult gay men. Participants completed separate measures designed to assess the aforementioned minority stress factors as well as measures designed to assess psychological distress, using scales derived from the Psychiatric Epidemiology Research Instrument (PERI; Dohrenwend et al. 1980). Findings revealed that internalized homophobia, stigma, and prejudice, independently and collectively, predicted psychological distress in gay men. High levels of minority stress factors were associated with a two- to threefold increase in risk for high levels of distress.

Waldo (1999) employed minority stress theory to explore the experience of workplace heterosexism by lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals. The study included results from 287 self-identifying gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals. Findings revealed a relation between the socio-occupational climate and experience of heterosexism in the workplace, which in turn were related to the job satisfaction and adjustment of participants. Participants who had experienced

heterosexism in the workplace exhibited increased psychological distress, health-related problems and lower job satisfaction. Findings also suggest that both direct and indirect experiences of heterosexism have similar adverse effects on the psychosocial well being of LGB individuals.

Concealment of one's sexual orientation can be a particularly stressful factor of minority stress for LGB individuals. To cope with minority stress, sexual minorities may choose to conceal their orientation as a means to protect themselves from potential victimization and discrimination (D'Augelli & Grossman, 2001). Concealment of one's sexual orientation is thus an important source of stress for gay men and lesbian women (DiPlacido, 1998; Meyer, 2003), as the threat of being 'found out' is ever-present and disclosure could have serious implications. However, while concealing one's sexual orientation may protect some from victimization, efforts made to hide one's stigmatized identity may lead to a host of psychological problems including anxiety, depression, guilt, shame, and isolation (Meyer, 2003; Pachankis, 2007). Research also suggests a negative association between concealment of one's sexual orientation and relationship satisfaction in same-sex couples (Berger, 1990; Jordan & Deluty, 2000).

While the research demonstrates that sexual minorities are vulnerable to a number of unique stressors and processes due to their stigmatization, Meyer (2003) also emphasizes the resilience of LGB individuals. Within a social context, LGB individuals have established networks of support in which they are able to develop norms and values, and foster an environment in which their relationships and identities are regarded with mutual respect and acknowledgment (D'Emilio, 1983; Meyer, 2003). The cohesiveness and group solidarity of LGBT networks become protective factors, assisting in the ability to cope with the unique stressors that accompany a minority status (Meyer, 2003).

In sum, a review of the literature reveals a great deal of evidence on the psychological implications of minority stress processes on LGB individuals. LGB individuals are subject to a number of unique stressors and processes, which often impact their psychosocial well-being and adjustment. The social environment has an impact on minority stress processes, as the degree of heterosexism (i.e., in the workplace) can have a profound effect on the individual's adjustment, self-esteem and job satisfaction. The anticipated rejection and fear of discrimination often felt by LGB persons leads some to conceal their sexual identity, which in turn could lead to additional psychological distress. These processes may be exacerbated in the socio-occupational context of the military in which heterosexist ideology is pervasive and LGB personnel are often discriminated against.

### **Minority Stress and Couples**

The relational implications of minority stress are of particular interest to the present study. While LGB persons' chronic minority stress is ever-present on the individual level, it also infiltrates the couple dynamic (Brown, 1995; Meyer, 2003). A number of studies have explored the dyadic experience of minority stress for same-sex couples.

Otis, Rostosky, Riggle and Hamrin (2006) explored the relationship between minority stress factors and relationship satisfaction in a sample of same-sex couples. Two hundred and ninety nine individuals completed a closed-access Internet-based survey. Of the total number of respondents, 131 couples participated, with each partner completing the survey. Participants completed a number of measures designed to assess two minority stress factors including internalized homophobia and perceived discrimination based on sexual orientation. Participants also completed a measure to assess generalized perceived stress. The Relationship Adjustment Scale (RAS: Hendrick, 1988) was used to assess relationship quality. Findings revealed that both

stress and internalized homophobia were significantly and inversely correlated to perception of relationship quality. Perceived stress was found to be significantly related to both the individual's own experience of internalized homophobia and to his or her partner's experiences of perceived discrimination. Findings also showed a couple-level effect for internalized homophobia, as an increase in either partner's reported level of internalized homophobia was associated with lower levels of reported relationship quality. Results suggest that perceived stress is a mediating factor in the relationship between minority stress and the perceived quality of same-sex relationships.

Mohr and Daly (2008) sought to investigate the effects of two sources of minority stress, internalized homophobia and sexual orientation self-concealment, on three variables that have been found to be predictors of relationship commitment in same-sex couples: relationship attractions, relationship constraints, and relationship satisfaction (Kurdek, 2000). The sample consisted of 51 self-identifying lesbian, gay and bisexual individuals ranging in age from 18-45. All participants were in a same-sex relationship and data were collected at two separate time points over a six-week span. The minority stress variables of internalized homo-negativity and sexual orientation concealment were measured using the Internalized Homonegativity Subscale and the Need for Privacy Subscale taken from the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Identity Scale (LGBIS; Mohr & Fassinger, 2003). Relationship satisfaction was measured by the Kansas Marital Satisfaction Scale (Schumm et al. 1986) and the Multidimensional Determinants of Relationship Commitment Inventory (MDRCI; Kurdek, 1995) was used to assess the perceived attractions, satisfactions and constraints of a relationship. Findings revealed that reported levels of internalized homonegativity were associated with decreases in relationship attraction and satisfaction, but was not found to predict changes in relationship constraints. Contrary to other

research findings, self-concealment did not predict any of the relationship variables: attractions, satisfactions and constraints. Mohr and Daly note, however, that the lack of significant results for self-concealment may have been due to the measure used, as it did not assess the degree to which participants engaged in concealment behaviors.

Rostosky, Riggle, Gray and Hatton (2007) sought to explore the relational experience of minority stress on committed same-sex couples in a qualitative study. The sample consisted of 40 same-sex couples; 20 male-male couples and 20 female-female couples. Participant couples had been in a relationship for an average of 5.33 years at the time of the study. Each couple was given a set of conversation prompts regarding commitment, perceptions of familial and general social support of the relationship, and their perceptions of similarities and differences of heterosexual and same-sex relationship commitment. The couple was left alone to discuss the set of questions while being audio and/or video-recorded. Qualitative analysis revealed several concrete themes related to couples' experiences of minority stress factors. Institutional discrimination was a dominant theme, as many couples expressed frustration with their lack of equal rights and the negative stereotypes attributed to same-sex relationships. Most participants discussed their experiences of coming to anticipate the rejection of others after experiencing repeated rejections by relatives in particular. The anticipated rejection prompted many individuals to engage in self-monitoring and concealing behavior in public settings so as to not draw attention to the couple relationship. Approximately one quarter of the respondents attributed adverse effects on the couple relationship to concealment behaviors, as some partners felt this conveyed a lack of commitment. Nearly one half of the respondents made statements that revealed some degree of internalized homonegativity directed toward the individual or relationship. Despite the adverse effects attributed to the minority status, many couples

discussed adaptive coping processes such as self-acceptance of their minority status and reframing their negative experiences as empowering rather than invalidating. Many participants also emphasized the importance of externalizing rejecting experiences and turning toward the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community for support.

In sum, the review of literature on minority stress processes in same-sex couples reveals a great deal of evidence for the relational implications of these factors on the couple relationship. Of primary concern to the same-sex couple relationship are the experiences of internalized homophobia, discrimination and concealment behaviors, which were found to impact individuals' perceptions of relationship quality and partners' experiences of discrimination, stress and perceived commitment in the relationship. A review of the literature also highlights the importance of access to a supportive community, often an LGB community, in adapting to and coping with the stressors associated with their minority status. It is currently unknown how same-sex military couples conjointly experience minority stress in a military context. It's possible that the military context may exacerbate the dyadic impact of minority stress processes, as service members were forced to conceal their identity and their same-sex relationships under DADT, and may have less access to supportive networks within the military community.

### **Military Context and Sexual Minorities**

A comprehensive analysis and exploration of the military's history with sexual minorities is beyond the scope of this review. However, a discussion of the most recent federal prohibition against LGB open service, DADT, and other relevant legislation that affects LGB personnel and their families will assist in understanding the social and political contexts in which these couples are embedded. A brief discussion of the dominant discourses within military culture will also be

presented. This analysis will also provide a context for understanding the current policies and their impact on same-sex military couples.

Past and present policy regarding sexual minorities in the military is undoubtedly influenced by the dominant discourses within the military culture. Although there is a great deal of variation amongst service members and within military culture, there are several unifying and/or predominant values commonly emphasized within military ideology. Military culture draws heavily from conservative values and conventionalist Christian influences (Devries, Hughes, Watson, & Moore, 2012) and as such, traditional gender roles and masculinity, in particular, are revered. Thus, central to military ideology is the notion of the ‘ideal soldier’, who engenders decidedly masculine, heterosexual, and dominant/aggressive qualities (Privedera & Howard, 2006; Rich, Schutten, & Rogers, 2012). As Rich, Schutten and Rogers (2012) assert, “To create the ideal soldier, femininity must be purged to attain a purely hegemonic and heterosexual masculinity; purging the feminine also includes overt rejection of male homosexuality” (p. 276). Ransom (2001) argues that the emphasis on the aforementioned traits created a double bind for lesbian service members by way of gender-based discrimination. A female’s assertiveness and ‘masculine’ characteristics, both of which are revered in military culture and aid in promotion, may invite scrutiny and an investigation into one’s sexual orientation (Ransom, 2001).

The clichéd views of lesbians and gay men have influenced many service members’ attitudes on policy prohibiting open service, as many reported concerns that gay men in particular would act in a “stereotypically effeminate manner” (DoD, 2010, p. 122) in the event of a repeal of DADT. Open service of gay men was thus thought by some personnel to be in direct contradiction to the image and/or identity of the ‘ideal’ soldier (Martinez, Hebl, & Law, 2012).

Attitudes toward maintaining the ban on open service tended to be stronger in Army combat and Marine Corps units (DoD, 2010).

LGB service members have endured official exclusionary policies since the time of WWII when homosexuality was considered an indicator of psychopathology (Herek & Belkin, 2005). This rationale was bolstered by the American Psychological Association's (APA) classification of homosexuality as a mental illness in 1952 (APA, 1952), which remained until 1973. Despite APA's progression, homosexuality was still deemed 'incompatible with military service' by the Department of Defense (DOD Directive 1332.14), and was listed as a mental disorder (DOD Directive 1332.38) until it was removed in 2004 (Martinez, Hebl, & Law, 2012).

The most recent federal prohibition against open service, Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT), enacted in 1993, was intended to be a compromise on the long-standing ban on LGB individuals serving in the military, as it afforded "closeted" LGB individuals to enlist in military service (Burks, 2011). Under DADT, potential recruits would no longer be screened for their sexual orientation, hence the "Don't Ask" clause. The intention of the policy was to preserve unit cohesion, morale, and heterosexual personnel's right to privacy/modesty, which would be compromised if unit members were aware of the presence of a gay, lesbian or bisexual service member (Herek & Belkin, 2006). Thus, by considering sexual orientation a private matter, military effectiveness would be preserved. Under DADT, individuals would be "separated from the armed forces" (DoD, 2010, p. 19), if a service member self-identified as homosexual, engaged in, attempted to engage in or solicit 'homosexual acts', or attempted to marry a person of the same biological sex (DoD, 2010), hence the "don't tell" clause.

While LGB individuals were afforded entry into the armed forces under DADT, the cost to both the service member's psyche and the military as an institution were vast. To date, over

13,000 qualified service members were discharged from the military under DADT policy (DoD, 2010). Many of those discharged had skills essential to the war effort in Iraq and Afghanistan such as combat engineers, language specialists, intelligence specialists, military police and security, supply and logistics personnel, missile guidance and control operators, artillery specialists, medical specialists, etc. (Frank, 2010).

The impact of DADT policy has actually served to undermine its intended purpose by hindering privacy, morale, family readiness, recruitment, retention and cohesion rather than preserving them (Frank, 2010). By turning friends and coworkers into informants, DADT policy significantly compromised unit cohesion and morale, creating an atmosphere of secrecy and distrust (Frank, 2010). Additionally, because LGB personnel faced military discharge if they disclosed their orientation, most were forced to conceal their stigmatized identity, which has been shown to lead to increased stress, anxiety, depression, guilt and isolation (Pachankis, 2007). Conversely, disclosing one's sexual identity has led to a number of positive outcomes (Moradi, 2009; RAND, 2010)

Moradi (2009) conducted the first empirical analysis exploring the relationship between sexual orientation concealment and unit cohesion in the military. The study included results from 445 LGBT military veterans ranging in age from 19-82 and representing all five military branches. The sample was comprised mostly of men, 72%, with 24% women and 3% self-identified transgender participants. Findings from the Internet-based survey revealed that veterans' reports of sexual orientation disclosure were positively related to their perceptions of social unit cohesion, whereas sexual orientation concealment was negatively related to perceived social cohesion. Further, findings revealed that sexual orientation disclosure had a positive indirect association with task cohesion. These findings suggest that disclosure of and openness

about one's sexual orientation have a positive role in unit cohesion, contrary to the rationale behind DADT.

In the years since DADT was enacted, there has been a gradual shift towards acceptance and a push for LGBT rights both among the American public (Carlson, 2003; RAND, 2010) and amongst military personnel (Moradi & Miller, 2009; Rogers, 2006). A survey released by the Department of Defense in 2010 indicated that approximately 70% of personnel surveyed felt that repealing the policy would not hamper unit readiness. Results from a Zogby International Poll echoed this sentiment, as approximately 75% of veterans of Iraq and/or Afghanistan polled reported that they felt comfortable serving around gays and lesbians (Rogers, 2006). Additionally, of those who reported knowing gay or lesbian personnel in their unit, a sizable majority reported that there was no impact on personal morale or the morale of their unit (Rogers, 2006). Further analysis of this data by Moradi and Miller (2010) revealed that comfort level with gay men and lesbians was the strongest correlate of attitudes regarding DADT policy. It seems as though LGB service members also sensed the changing social climate, as anonymous surveys conducted prior to DADT's repeal indicated that some LGB service members were 'out' in some capacity to their unit, and felt their unit was relatively accepting (RAND, 2010).

In addition to the shift toward acceptance and inclusion of sexual minorities in the military, there has been a marked decline in discharges of gay and lesbian service members since the Global War on Terror began in 2001 (Frank, 2004; Herek & Belkin, 2006; RAND, 2010). This pattern of differential enforcement has been noted over the years during times of war in which there have been heightened manpower needs (Evans, 2001; Herek & Belkin, 2006). As Moradi and Miller (2009) assert, "This reduced enforcement of the policy during wartime calls into question whether military commanders agree with the policy that the impact of lesbian and

gay service members outweighs the contributions those service members make to their units' mission" (p. 399).

DADT was officially repealed in September of 2011. Lesbian, gay and bisexual service members are now able to serve openly for the first time in the history of the U.S. military. However, LGB service members and same-sex military couples may still face discrimination and stigmatization within a military context despite policy reform. For instance, same-sex partners and/or spouses of service members are restricted in their role in military ceremonies including funerals and promotions and denied military dependent status. Herek and Belkin (2006) assert that some negative attitudes surrounding homosexuality and military service will persist so long as the aforementioned ideologies and dominant discourses within military culture remain and are ascribed to.

Following the repeal of DADT in 2012, LGB service members and their families continued to endure discrimination and gross inequity within military policy and procedures due in large part to a federal law known as the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). Though DOMA was struck down in 2013, allowing committed same-sex couples to be recognized as military dependents, a brief discussion of its impact on same-sex military couples is warranted. DOMA inhibited the full extension of dependent benefits to committed same-sex couples, thereby restricting their access to a number of necessary benefits and resources including health care, on-base support activities, survivor benefits, educational benefits, housing allowances, etc. (Dolan & Biggs, 2012). A number of these support services played an essential role in readying military families for and assisting them to cope with deployment-related stressors (Dolan & Biggs, 2012). DOMA therefore significantly impaired the family readiness of LGB service members and their families by restricting access to aforementioned necessary support services (Dolan & Biggs,

2012). Therefore, the deployment process may have been considerably more challenging for same-sex military couples as partners may not have had access to Family Readiness Groups, support groups for spouses, and could not receive Survivor Benefits, as they were not considered dependents due to DOMA's definition of a spouse (Dolan & Biggs, 2012). While recent years have marked significant gains for LGB service members with the repeal of DADT and DOMA, there will continue to be discrepancies in access to resources and uncertainty around federal recognition until LGB couples can marry in every state in the nation.

### **LGB Service Members**

Lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) individuals have a long-standing history of military service in the United States Armed Forces (Burrelli, 1994; Shilts, 1993). Despite many decades of exclusionary policies and prohibitions on open service (Burks, 2011; Herek & Belkin, 2006), sexual minorities have served covertly since the founding of the nation (Shilts, 1993). Although LGB personnel are now able to serve openly after the repeal of DADT in 2011, the social climate continues to prevent collecting definitive data on the number of LGB service members. At the time of the 2000 Census, there were an estimated one million gay and lesbian military veterans (Gates, 2004). The current estimates on the number of gay, lesbian and bisexual personnel range from 66,000 to 78,000 (Frank, 2010; RAND, 2010), accounting for approximately 2.2% (Gates, 2010) to 3.7% of all military personnel, active duty or otherwise (RAND, 2010). Available data show that lesbian and gay personnel are estimated to be serving at rates comparable to their numbers in the civilian population (RAND, 2010). Of the sexual minorities in the armed forces, lesbian and bisexual women serve at disproportionately high rates compared to gay and bisexual men (Gates, 2010; Herek, 2010; RAND, 2010). Additionally, LGB men and women are more likely to serve in the guard or reserve than on active duty status (Gates, 2010).

Of particular concern to LGB service members are the cumulative and compounding effects of chronic minority stress in both military and civilian contexts. Indeed, as Wilder and Wilder (2012) emphasize, “When LGB individuals arrive for their first day of military service, they do so with a lifetime of experiences wrapped in the context of U.S. culture, which has included pervasive discrimination and heterosexism (Meyer, 2007),” (p. 626). The previously mandated secrecy surrounding sexual orientation and pervasive heterosexism within military culture may exacerbate a service member’s experience of minority stress. Additionally, until recently, LGB service members had limited opportunities to identify with and access supportive others within LGBT communities, which has been found to predict positive adjustment (Johnson & Burhke, 2006; Meyer, 2003; Pachankis, 2007). The socio-occupational stress, discrimination, stigmatization and isolation experienced by some LGB service members may place them at an elevated risk for suicide (Wilder & Wilder, 2012).

In 2004, Balsam, Cochran and Simpson conducted the first U.S. study to explore the experiences of LGBT veterans as part of a Joint Divisional Task Force on Sexual Orientation and Military Service (APA, 2009). Researchers utilized an anonymous, web-based survey to collect data from 445 LGBT veterans regarding their military experiences, mental health, general functioning, physical health, identity development and health service needs and utilization patterns. In terms of demographics, participants ranged in age from 19-83 years old and identified primarily as lesbian or gay (88.7%) with 7.2 percent identifying as bisexual. Among the respondents, 44 percent reported that they were in a same-sex relationship at the time of the survey. Thirty five percent of respondents reported previous exposure to a war zone during their service. Respondents generally indicated mixed reactions to their time in the military. Approximately 59 percent felt that their experiences had been different and more difficult than

their heterosexual peers. However a sizable majority (68.3%) reported having some fond memories of their experience in the armed forces. Many respondents (67.1%) reported feelings of anxiety and fear surrounding the possibility of having their LGBT identity discovered during their service. Many respondents reported experiences of discrimination and almost half (47.2%) indicated having experienced at least one incident of verbal, physical or sexual victimization due to their minority status. Almost one-third of the respondents were subject to an investigation of their sexual orientation. Perceived bias impeded many participants' utilization of care at VA service centers.

Trivette (2011) explored the social effects of DADT in a qualitative study. Using a phenomenological approach, 24 gay and lesbian veterans, 18 gay men and 6 lesbians, were interviewed to explore their lived experiences of serving under the policy. Qualitative analysis revealed several themes surrounding how participants experienced their military service and social interactions under DADT. Many participants expressed anxiety and confliction around the lack of privacy in military settings and the subsequent need to conceal one's sexual orientation identity. The management of this identity was of paramount importance to many participants and several noted that the need to conceal their sexual minority status prevented them from seeking support services for fear that the therapist or priest would report them. Though many participants expressed appreciation for camaraderie in the military, the need to conceal one's sexual orientation served to create a double bind, the 'camaraderie paradox', in which service members experienced competing pressures both to disclose in order to enhance cohesion and solidarity and to conceal their sexual orientation to protect themselves from victimization and administrative separation. The social isolation drove some to disclose their orientation, while many other participants aired on the side of caution and chose to conceal their orientation, often experiencing

constant fear and vigilance surrounding their identity. This fear unfortunately was not unfounded for many of the participants, as ten veteran respondents were discharged under the policy. Of those respondents who disclosed, several reported the experience as positive and leading to stronger relationships to unit members. Trivette also found that many respondents were connected to other LGB service members through a covert network. This so called; 'Gay Underground Network' provided a collective space through which LGB personnel could conjointly process their experience of being a sexual minority in the military and integrate their sexual and military identities. Camaraderie, while hindered through DADT policy, was reestablished through this network of supportive others.

RAND (2010) conducted an anonymous Internet survey of gay personnel to explore how DADT was affecting them and how they would respond if DADT were repealed. This study marks one of the few empirical research studies to explore the experiences of current LGB service members rather than veterans. The survey drew results from 208 self-identified lesbian, gay and bisexual personnel. In terms of demographics, the sample represented ranks ranging from junior enlisted to officers, of which the latter constituted a disproportionately high representation. Overall, the majority of respondents indicated that they felt DADT puts LGB personnel at risk for blackmail and manipulation and impaired relationships with others in their unit. Over one third of respondents attributed mental health issues to the policy. Respondents reported varying degrees of disclosure with regard to their sexual orientation. Sixty eight percent of participants reported that they either actively avoid discussing their orientation or attempt to pass as heterosexual to their unit. Very few participants, three percent, indicated that they were open with others in their unit, while 29 percent reported that they were more fluid in their disclosure, as they were open with their unit members at times, but not on a consistent basis.

Regardless of level of participant disclosure, most respondents reported that there were substantial levels of awareness among their unit, suggesting that 'knowing' is more common than 'telling'. Most participants reported that they would feel more comfortable including their partners in military events and ceremonies, and being open with others about their same-sex relationships once the policy were repealed. Several respondents reported that they would feel comfortable enough to put pictures of their partners on their desk if DADT were repealed.

Of particular interest to the present study are the qualitative, first-hand accounts of LGB military personnel serving in OEF and OIF garnered by historian, Nathaniel Frank in 2004. Frank sought to explore the experiences of gay, lesbian and bisexual service members who were deployed to Afghanistan and/or Iraq for Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom respectively. Specifically, Frank aimed to investigate the impact of DADT policy on the capacity for LGB personnel to perform their duties. The sample consisted of 30 gay, lesbian and bisexual service members representing four branches of the armed forces, the Army, Navy, Marines and Air Force. In-depth interviews were conducted with each participant. A central theme discussed by many participants was that the mandated secrecy warranted by DADT significantly impaired participants' ability to bond with other gay troops and heterosexual comrades. Many respondents expressed tension and frustration due to the fact that they were required to "shut down" in an environment in which forming close bonds with others is paramount and encouraged. This led some troops to be perceived as aloof or uncaring. Others who served openly reported that relationships with others often improved following disclosure. Another theme identified through analysis was: access to support services. Findings suggest that many gays and lesbians who served during OEF and OIF experienced restricted access to support services and benefits, which placed unique stressors on LGB troops and significantly impaired

the family readiness of the same-sex couple and/or family. This was reported as a great source of stress for many respondents, as they were not able to include the partner in the necessary paperwork to prepare for deployment. This was also a great stress during deployment because participants were unable to include their partners' names on a contact list of significant others without inviting scrutiny and potentially an investigation. Many respondents also reported a fear of having their communication with their partner monitored. As a result, many participants reported that they had to resort to writing or talking in code, changing names and pronouns, or leaving post to make phone calls.

Overall, results from Frank's (2004) study suggest that DADT increases LGB personnel's stress levels, impedes their ability to form trusting bonds with their unit members, restricts access to necessary support services for themselves and their partners, and limits their willingness to re-enlist. The adverse effects of DADT were exacerbated during deployment for OEF and OIF when access to alternative support, such as support from their partner, was less available. Additionally, consistent with other research, findings revealed that those troops who did serve openly during deployment generally reported a positive experience and enhanced unit cohesion following disclosure.

In sum, a review of the literature reveals a great deal of evidence for the personal ramifications of DADT policy on past and present service members. DADT policy created an atmosphere of secrecy and distrust, which had a significant impact on the well-being and psychological health of LGB service members and impeded their access to support services. Additionally, the policy largely hindered many LGB personnel members' abilities to bond and form trusting relationships with others in their unit, though some personnel reported positive experiences following disclosing their sexual orientation. The deployment process tended to

exacerbate these stressors. While limited data exists on the experiences of LGB service members, research on LGB personnel's experiences following the repeal of DADT is particularly scant. Further, research on the experience of the same-sex military couple has yet to be conducted.

### **Deployment and the Couple Relationship**

Military spouses, service members, and civilians alike espouse the notion that the demands of military life are detrimental to relationship satisfaction and stability, and often leave the couple vulnerable to separation and/or divorce (Allen, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2010; Karney, & Crown, 2007). This association is not unfounded, as Karney and Crown (2007) found that among both enlisted members and officers in the United States Air Force, "the more days that married service members spent deployed, the greater their risk of dissolving their marriages after they returned" (p. xxiii). Conversely, the same effect was not found among married members of the Army, Navy and Marine Corps (Karney & Crown, 2007). The association warrants further exploration however, as Lieutenant Colonel Darrell Duckworth (2009) posits that the increased operational pace of the most recent engagements, Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi freedom, coupled with an increased number of deployments per service member make the relationships of soldiers and Marines particularly more vulnerable to dissolution and/or divorce. Further, the service conditions in OEF and OIF are distinct from that of previous engagements with regard to the type of warfare, sustained ground combat and frequent insurgent attacks. These increased demands on service members put additional strain on the military family, and on military couples in particular, as partners had less time to prepare for deployment and less time to readjust upon the service member's return.

Military couples often experience marital distress and a host of other unpleasant psychological symptoms throughout the deployment cycle (Pincus, House, Christenson, & Adler,

2008), which consists of three major phases: pre-deployment, deployment, and redeployment (Laser & Stephens, 2010; Sneath & Rheem, 2011). Pincus et al. (2008) note a distinct emotional cycle of extended deployments, in which each stage is characterized by particular emotional challenges and tasks to be overcome. Each phase of the deployment cycle thus places unique demands on military couples (Karney & Crown, 2007). During the deployment process, both partners are likely to experience heightened anxiety, emotional disorganization, loss, emptiness, and loneliness, while spouses are more likely to feel a sense of abandonment and loss (Laser & Stephens, 2010; Pincus et al. 2008; Sneath & Rheem, 2011).

Mansfield et al. (2010) sought to explore the impact of deployment on the mental health of military spouses. Mansfield et al. examined electronic medical record data for outpatient care received by 250,626 wives of active-duty soldiers during the years of 2003 to 2006. After adjusting for a number of variables, the relationship between wives' mental health diagnoses and the length of the spouses' deployments were examined. Findings revealed that a husband's deployment and the length of deployment were associated with the mental health outcomes of the participant wives. Of the participants whose husbands were deployed during the study period, over thirty-six percent had at least one mental health diagnosis, compared to thirty percent of women whose husbands were not deployed. The increased risk of mental health diagnoses was most evident for depressive, anxiety, acute stress reaction, sleep and adjustment disorders.

Baptist et al. (2011) explored how military couples were affected by and adapted to OIF and OEF deployments in a qualitative study. Using a phenomenological approach, 50 military couples were interviewed about the intra- and interpersonal experience of deployment during OEF or OIF. Partners were interviewed separately in an effort to limit self-censoring. The study included results from a smaller subset of the sample, thirty participants, twelve male service

members and eighteen female spouses. Qualitative analysis revealed three themes: communicating to stay connected, emotional and marital intimacy, and managing change. Of the three themes identified, communicating to stay connected was dominant. Both service members and their spouses stressed the importance of staying connected through regular contact throughout the duration of deployment. Maintaining contact helped to provide support, enhance trust and enabled couples to express their need for one another. Further, many female participants considered communicating with deployed spouses to be the primary coping strategy to manage the stress and anxiety during deployment. When communication was restricted or inhibited, participants expressed less feelings of connection. Participant couples used communication primarily as a means to maintain emotional connection, rather than exchanging news per se, as many service members indicated that they were selective with what they chose to share. While most wives communicated an understanding of the selective censoring, many felt the lack of information made it difficult to know how to fully support their spouse. Participant couples also discussed having to adjust to the heightened emotions during the deployment process and adapt to the shift in roles and responsibilities. These challenges persisted or were exacerbated upon the service member's return, as members had to readjust to a new family dynamic and roles within the family system. The deployment process and fear of losing their loved ones enhanced feelings of connection and intimacy between some military couples. Communication seemed to be the primary adaptive process for well-adjusted military couples following deployment, while those who were unable to maintain connections through regular contact struggled more adjusting to the process.

In sum, a review of the literature on military deployment and couples sheds light on the relational impact of the deployment process on the couple relationship and the adaptive strategies

employed by these couples. The deployment process often causes heightened emotionality, anxiety, stress and strain, loneliness, etc. within the couple system. As the previous research has been conducted exclusively on married, heterosexual couples, little is known about how same-sex couples conjointly experience and cope with military deployment. The aim of the present study is to explore how same-sex military couples experience and adapt to military deployment.

## Chapter 3: Methods

### Design of the study

This study utilized a transcendental phenomenological design (Moustakas, 1994) to explore how same-sex military couples' experienced the deployment processes during OIF and OEF. Qualitative methodology lent itself perfectly to the purpose of this study, as it provided an opportunity to 'hear silenced voices' (Creswell, 2007, p. 40) and empowered participants to use their own voices to share their experiences. The use of a phenomenological lens allowed participants to provide an in-depth account of their lived experiences of the deployment process and the way in which participant couples co-created meaning of this experience. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with participant couples conjointly to capture the essence of the relational experience of deployment. Joint interviews offered a 'common reflective space' (Bjornholt & Farstad, 2012, p. 7) for participant couples, as well as an experiential understanding of the couple's experience as a 'whole' (Dahl & Boss, 2005, p. 66).

### Epoche

In keeping with the philosophical assumptions and traditions of transcendental phenomenological inquiry, it is essential that I explicitly describe and acknowledge my personal experience with the phenomenon of military deployment, as I am not separate from the phenomena of study (Dahl & Boss, 2005; Moustakas, 1994). As a military spouse with prior experience as the partner of a deployed service member, the *epoche* was a necessary first step prior to engaging with the realities of the co-researchers (Moustakas, 1994). As Moustakas (1994) describes, "In the Epoche, the everyday understandings, judgments, and knowings are set aside, and phenomena are revisited, freshly, naively, in a wide open sense, from the vantage point of a pure or transcendental ego" (p. 33). Making explicit my prior and ongoing

experiences with military deployment was vital throughout the research process, as it afforded a more thoughtful immersion into the couples' realities, the fundamental purpose of phenomenological inquiry (Dahl & Boss, 2005; Moustakas, 1994). The epoche was an ongoing process throughout all phases of the study. I engaged in extensive bracketing practices through journaling, keeping memos, and meeting with colleagues to debrief and discuss potential ways in which my prior experiences and/or biases have impacted my data collection and/or analyses.

### **Participants and Recruitment Process**

LGB military service members and their partners who had jointly experienced deployment during OEF and/or OIF were recruited for participation in this study. Due to the relative difficulty of reaching this population, support organizations, such as the American Military Partner Association (AMPA), Military Partners and Families Coalition (MPFC), and OutServe-SLDN were asked to help facilitate the recruitment process by referring potential participant couples and/or advertising the study through social media and email listservs. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University approved this study prior to beginning recruitment.

Approximately 20 individuals contacted the investigator and expressed interest in participation. The investigator contacted respondents by phone to assess whether they met the selection criteria. Inclusion criteria for the participants were the following: (a) at least one partner with prior or current service in the United States Armed Forces, (b) have deployment experience during OIF and/or OEF, (c) were in a committed, same-sex relationship for the entirety of the deployment process(es), (d) have been committed or cohabitating for at least one year, and (e) are aged 18 or older.

Qualifying participant couples were sent a copy of the informed consent to review prior to volunteering to participate in the study, which included detailed information about the purpose and nature of the research. Eighteen individuals (9 couples) met aforementioned purposive criteria and agreed to participate in the study. One participant was mobilized to support the war effort overseas and was not forward deployed. The couple's experiences did not significantly differ from other participant couples and was included in the data set.

## **Procedures**

After the participant couples were successfully screened, joint interviews were scheduled at mutually agreeable times and locations. Interviews were conducted in-person if participants' circumstances allowed. Two interviews were conducted via online video conferencing due to travel restrictions. Despite the alternative medium through which these interviews were conducted, there were no significant differences with regard to structure, quality, or content.

The researcher conducted and audiotaped nine conjoint, semi-structured interviews with participant couples. Informed consent was obtained prior to beginning the joint interview. The potential risks and benefits of participation were addressed, as well as efforts made by the researcher to maintain confidentiality throughout the research process and dissemination of findings. The researcher reminded participants of their right to withdraw at any time in the course of participation. Participants were invited to self-select pseudonyms to further maintain confidentiality and anonymity, and were also assigned a unique couple identifier. Each partner independently completed a demographic questionnaire prior to beginning the joint interview.

Upon completion of the interview, the researcher discussed the data analyses procedures and sought permission to contact each participant couple for the purposes of member checking. Participants were asked if they would like a copy of the study results. All couples expressed

interest in receiving a copy of the final manuscript, which will be sent to participants upon the study's publication.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist. All data and contact information was safeguarded in a secure location in the researcher's home. Electronic copies of data and audio recordings of interviews were stored in a password-protected file on the researcher's private laptop and on an encrypted external hard drive for backup purposes. The interview recordings and study codes were accessible only to the principal researcher and research committee chair. Audio recordings were destroyed after all interviews had been transcribed.

### **Instruments**

The guiding interview schedule consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' perspectives and experiences relative to the deployment process. The researcher asked probing questions intermittently throughout the interview to elicit rich descriptions from participants, allowing for new meanings and interpretations to emerge. Interview questions are included:

1. Can you start by telling me a little about yourselves? Where are you from? How did you choose to serve in the military, and long have you served?
2. Could you give me a brief history of your relationship?
  - a. How did you meet and how long have you been together?
  - b. When did you all get together in the cycle of your military career?
3. Tell me about your experience of the deployment process. [If there have been multiple deployments, feel free to respond in general and make distinctions when you would like to]

- a. How many total for service member? How many for the couple? Lengths of times? Locations?

#### Pre-deployment

4. What were both of your feelings upon receiving orders for deployment?
5. How did you emotionally prepare for deployment?
  - a. How was this helpful to you?
  - b. What do you wish you had done differently?
6. What was the emotional impact on your relationship?
7. What were your feelings as you prepared for deployment?
  - a. Emotional, physical, spiritual?
8. In preparing to separate from your partner for deployment, what did you find most helpful? Looking back, what would you have done differently?
9. What were your main stressors at that time in the relationship?
  - a. How did you cope?

#### During Deployment

10. What were your feelings about reaching out to your spouse for support while overseas?
11. How were you able to connect to one another during deployment? Were there any things you did to stay close?
12. What were your feelings regarding seeking alternative means of support/outside resources (family, friends, military and civilian support groups)?
  - a. Were there any resources you feel you missed out on due to your sexual minority status?

13. Some LGB service members say that they were comfortable coming out to unit members and were able to receive support, while others say that they had to be more guarded with their sexual orientation and felt more isolated from unit support.

a. Were you able to seek support from your unit?

b. Were you able to find support through the military community at large?

14. Some couples say that deployment brings them closer together or makes them stronger, while other couples say it drives them apart. How do you feel the deployment impacted your relationship with your partner?

15. How were you able to adapt to the stress of deployment as a couple?

#### Post-deployment

16. What was it like when you or your partner returned?

17. How do you feel your experience of deployment as a same-sex couple is different than straight couples?

a. Unique challenges?

b. Unique advantages?

18. What changes in your relationship, if any, do you associate with the experience?

19. Have you shared all that is significant with regard to your experience? Have I missed anything?

#### **Data Analyses**

Data analysis was guided by a structured method of phenomenological analysis outlined by Moustakas (1994). This process included a series of steps designed to facilitate the development of individual and composite textural and structural descriptions, which were then integrated and used to encapsulate the overall essence of the experience of the deployment

process for same-sex couples. The process included the following overarching stages of analysis: (a) phenomenological reduction, (b) imaginative variation and (c) synthesis of composite meanings and essences (Moustakas, 1994).

The data analysis began with a process referred to as horizontalization, through which every statement relevant to the area of study was considered for its significance and treated as having equal worth (Moustakas, 1994). Five hundred and fifty-six significant statements related to the couples' experience of deployment were identified within verbatim transcripts. Redundant or repeated statements were extracted, leaving the "invariant meaning units" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122), or horizons, of the couples' experience of deployment. Identified invariant horizons were clustered into meaning units or themes. Themes were synthesized to develop a description of *what* the participant couples experienced throughout the deployment process, referred to as the textural description (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell). The individual textural descriptions were later used to summarize the structural description, which reflected the underlying dynamics of the couples' experience and the ways in which the setting or context influenced *how* the couples experienced the deployment process (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2007). Textural and structural descriptions were then synthesized to derive the composite "essence" of each couple's experience of deployment, and were later used for the purposes of member checking. Composite textural-structural descriptions were also synthesized to capture the overall essence of the common lived experiences of same sex military couples navigating the deployment process, thereby fulfilling the purpose of phenomenological inquiry (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Validation Methods**

A number of methods to establish validity and credibility were employed throughout all phases of the study (Creswell, 2007). The primary researcher engaged in extensive bracketing,

as recommended by Moustakas (1994), to make explicit her own experiences with and presuppositions about deployment prior to and during data collection and analysis. The research team also conducted several peer review meetings to debrief following interview appointments and discuss emerging meanings and interpretations (Creswell, 2007). Member checking was the primary means for establishing credibility throughout data analysis. Member checking, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985) is “the most critical technique for establishing credibility” (p. 314). Member checking is also consistent with the overarching goal of phenomenology, to remain connected to the experiences of research participants (Dahl & Boss, 2005). Composite textural-structural essences were sent to each participant couple to review. All nine couples participated in this process by responding to the member checking email. The majority of participants were fully satisfied with the summary and two provided only minor revisions.

## **Chapter 4: Manuscript**

### **Abstract**

Research investigating how same-sex military couples conjointly experience the deployment process is absent. This study employed transcendental phenomenological methods (Moustakas, 1994) to explore the lived experiences of same-sex military couples and the deployment process. In-depth, conjoint interviews were conducted with eighteen individuals: five female couples and four male couples, representing four military branches, Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps. Three thematic categories emerged that revealed the essence of the couples' experiences of deployment: Deployment experience is context-dependent, challenges associated with sexual minority status, and learned resilience. Though couples experienced a host of unique challenges related to their minority status and restrictive policies, couples developed adaptive coping strategies that served to mediate the impact of distinctive challenges and restrictions. Findings demonstrate the vulnerability and resilience of same-sex military couples during deployment. Political, clinical, and research implications are discussed.

*Keywords:* same-sex, military, couples, deployment, phenomenology, resilience

Lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) individuals have a long-standing history of military service in the United States Armed Forces (Burrelli, 1994; Shilts, 1993). Despite many decades of exclusionary policies and prohibitions on open service (Burks, 2011; Herek & Belkin, 2005), sexual minorities have served covertly since the founding of the nation (Shilts, 1993). With the repeal of Don't Ask, Don't Tell (DADT) in September of 2011, lesbian, gay and bisexual service members are able to serve openly without fear of being discharged from the military. In 2013, the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) was struck down, allowing legally married same-sex couples to receive federal recognition, and thus receive military dependent benefits.

These policy changes reflect a push for LGB rights among the American public (Carlson, 2003; RAND, 2010) and military personnel (Jacobs, 2005; Moradi & Miller, 2009). However, despite the recent surge of media and political attention regarding sexual minorities and the military, limited research has investigated the experiences of LGB service members (Cochran et al., 2013). At present, the majority of relevant literature is either anecdotal in the form of personal accounts or executive and/or technical reports conducted by task forces and federal agencies (Burks, 2011). Notably absent is research investigating the experience of same-sex military couples. Though the so-called 'silent sacrifices' of these military families are beginning to garner attention, the true extent of these sacrifices remains unknown (Wescott & Sawyer, 2007).

At the time of the 2000 Census, there were an estimated one million gay and lesbian military veterans (Gates, 2004). The current estimates on the number of gay, lesbian and bisexual personnel range from 66,000 to 78,000 (Frank, 2010; RAND, 2010), accounting for approximately 2.2% (Gates, 2010) to 3.7% of all military personnel, active duty or otherwise

(RAND, 2010). However, these numbers are likely underestimated given the previously mandated secrecy and heterosexist notions within military culture.

The Global War on Terror, initiated in 2001, was the first major military operation since the ratification of DADT in 1993. The war on terror heightened the operational tempo and increased the number of deployments per service member to an unprecedented level (Duckworth, 2009; Karney & Crown, 2007). Hence, the deployment cycle revolved more quickly as many units returning from Afghanistan and/or Iraq received deployment orders again within six months of redeployment (Duckworth, 2009). These increased demands on service members put additional strain on military couples, as partners had less time to prepare for deployment and to readjust upon the service member's return (Baptist et al., 2011; Duckworth, 2009; Karney & Crown, 2007; Laser & Stephens, 2010).

Due to the prior federal prohibitions against open service, it is unknown how many LGB service members deployed during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). Since LGB personnel are estimated to be serving at rates comparable to their numbers in the civilian population (RAND, 2010), it is fair to infer that rates of committed same-sex military relationships are similar to those of the civilian population (Herek et al., 2010). It is therefore likely that a significant number of deployed LGB veterans were in committed relationships throughout the deployment process.

A comprehensive analysis and exploration of the military's history with sexual minorities is beyond the scope of this article (see Sinclair, 2009 for review). However, a brief discussion of the impact of DADT and DOMA policies on LGB personnel and their partners will assist in understanding the context in which these individuals deployed. Of particular concern to same-sex military couples are the compounding effects of DADT, DOMA and deployment-related

relational distress. Under DADT, LGB personnel were effectively forced to conceal their stigmatized identity, which increased their risk for acute stress, anxiety, depression, guilt and isolation (Pachankis, 2007), and PTSD (Cochran et al., 2013). Indeed, many gay service members (RAND, 2010) attributed a variety of mental health problems to DADT, indicating an adverse effect on personal relationships and relationships within their unit. Rather than preserving unit cohesion and camaraderie by making sexuality a ‘non-issue’, DADT served to inhibit trust and emotional closeness by requiring LGB service members to hide their identity (Frank, 2010; Trivette, 2010). Partners of LGB service members, also forced to hide their identities during DADT, were unable to openly participate in military events and ceremonies such as homecomings, retirements and promotions, and had limited or no access to military support (Wescott & Sawyer, 2007). Frank (2004) found that the adverse effects of DADT were exacerbated during deployment for OEF/OIF when access to alternative support was limited due in part to fears of communication with partners being monitored. However, consistent with other research findings (Moradi, 2009; RAND, 2010), Frank (2004) found that troops who were open on some level to other unit members generally reported a positive experience and improved unit cohesion following disclosure. DOMA likely exacerbated deployment-related stress as well, as it significantly impaired the family readiness of LGB service members and their partners by restricting access to a number of essential benefits and resources including health care, on-base support activities, survivor benefits, educational benefits, housing allowances, etc. (Dolan & Biggs, 2012).

There is empirical evidence for a myriad of relational implications of the deployment process on couple relationships. Couples often experience conflict and a host of other psychological symptoms throughout the deployment cycle (Laser & Stephens, 2010; Pincus et al.,

2008; Sneath & Rheem, 2011). Indeed, McLeland, Sutton and Schumm (2008) found that recent deployments were associated with lower levels of marital satisfaction among military personnel before, during and after deployment. The relational distress continues throughout all phases of deployment during which both partners are likely to experience heightened anxiety, emotional disorganization, loss, emptiness, and loneliness, while service members' partners are more likely to feel a sense of abandonment and loss (Laser & Stephens, 2010; Pincus et al., 2008; Sneath & Rheem, 2011). This risk increases with lengthy deployments, deployment extensions, combat exposure and combat-related trauma (Allen, Rhoades, Stanley & Markman, 2011; deBurgh, White, Fear, & Iverson, 2011; Hoge et al. 2004; Mental Health Advisory Team (MHAT), 2006).

The reunification period is also particularly stressful for military couples as they must adjust to the changes and challenges brought on by the deployment process and cope with any resulting combat trauma (Baptist et al., 2011; Karney & Crown, 2007). Mental health problems associated with combat trauma such as, PTSD, depression and anxiety are consistently related to poor relationship functioning (Allen et al., 2011; Knobloch & Theiss, 2011; Milikin, Auchterlonie, & Hoge, 2007; Nelson Goff, Crow, Reisbeg, & Hamilton, 2007). It is not uncommon for returning veterans to report relational distress for the first twelve months post-deployment (Hoge, Castro, & Eaton, 2006).

Previous research on couples' experience of deployment has been conducted almost exclusively with married, heterosexual couples. Given the number of similarities between heterosexual and same-sex couples (Kurdek, 1988; 2005), it is fair to infer that committed same-sex couples face a comparable relational experience during the deployment process. However, as a stigmatized minority group, committed same-sex military couples face additional stressors and challenges throughout military deployment. While there are a few research studies that

investigate the experience of lesbian, bisexual and gay service members during deployment (Frank, 2004), research exploring this experience from the perspective of committed same-sex couples is notably absent. As LGB service members are now able serve our country openly, it is imperative to gain a better understanding of their unique experiences, strengths and challenges so as to better serve this population. The purpose of the present study was to explore how LGB service members and their partners conjointly experienced the deployment process during OEF and OIF, and how they made meaning of their “silent sacrifices” (Wescott & Sawyer, 2007).

## **Methods**

### **Design**

A transcendental phenomenological design (Moustakas, 1994) was used to explore how same-sex military couples’ experienced the deployment processes during OIF and OEF. Qualitative methodology was well suited to the purpose of this study, as it provided a compelling opportunity to ‘hear silenced voices’ (Creswell, 2007, p. 40). In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted conjointly to capture the essence of the relational experience of deployment, and afforded a ‘common reflective space’ (Bjornholt & Farstad, 2012, p. 7) through which partners could collectively process their experiences. As suggested by Moustakas (1994), the first author and primary researcher engaged in extensive bracketing throughout all phases of the study to make explicit her previous experiences with and beliefs about deployment.

### **Participants, Recruitment and Setting**

LGB military service members and their partners who had jointly experienced deployment during OEF and/or OIF were recruited for participation in this study. Due to the relative difficulty of reaching this population, support organizations, such as the American Military Partner Association (AMPA), Military Partners and Families Coalition (MPFC), and

OutServe-SLDN were asked to help facilitate the recruitment process by referring potential participant couples and/or advertising the study through social media and email listservs. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University approved this study prior to beginning recruitment.

Approximately 20 individuals contacted the investigator and expressed interest in participation. The investigator contacted respondents by phone to assess whether they met the selection criteria. Inclusion criteria for the participants were the following: (a) at least one partner with prior or current service in the United States Armed Forces, (b) have deployment experience during OIF and/or OEF, (c) were in a committed, same-sex relationship for the entirety of the deployment process(es), (d) have been committed or cohabitating for at least one year, and (e) are aged 18 or older.

Qualifying participant couples were sent a copy of the informed consent to review prior to volunteering to participate in the study. Nine participant couples met the inclusion criteria and agreed to participate in the study. One participant was mobilized to support the war effort overseas and was not forward deployed; their data was included in analyses due to the similarity of their experiences.

Joint interviews were scheduled at mutually agreeable times and locations and were conducted in-person if participants' circumstances allowed. Two interviews were conducted via online video conferencing due to travel restrictions. Eighteen individuals (9 couples) participated in this study, 10 females and 8 males. Participants represented four service branches and had a diverse range of rank and length of service. At the time of deployment, only one couple, couple 6, was legally married. See Table 1 for a detailed description of the participants.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

ID	Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Years together	Military Branch	Years of Service	Status	Rank	Times deployed*
1	Elizabeth	28	White	3	Navy	8 active; 2 reserve	Reservist	E-7	1
	Dawn	24	Wh/Hisp	3	Air Force	>1	Active Duty	O-1	1
2	Jennifer	38	White	16	–	–	–	–	6
	Megan	37	White	16	Air Force	12	Reservist	E-7	6
3	Bos'n	55	White	20	Navy	31	Retired	E-8	1 <sup>^</sup>
	Susan	65	White	20	–	–	–	–	1
4	Sue	27	White	2.5	Air Force	4	Active Duty	E-4	1
	Peggy	33	Asian	2.5	–	–	–	–	1
5	Bailey	25	Hispanic	2.25	Navy	7	Active Duty	E-5	1
	Petunia	20	White	2.25	Navy	3	Active Duty	E-4	1
6	Tom	38	White	6	Navy	15	Active Duty	O-4	1
	Bill	35	White	6	–	–	–	–	1
7	Mateo	36	Hispanic	8.5	Navy	17	Active Duty	E-7	3
	Reed	44	White	8.5	–	–	–	–	3
8	Jake	26	Hispanic	3	Army	5	Active Duty	E-5	1
	Sam	26	White	3	Army	4.5	Active Duty	E-4	1
9	Rick	37	Asian	9	Marine Corps	19	Active Duty	O-4	1
	JJ	33	White	9	Navy	5	Prior Enlisted	E-4	1

*Note.* \* = deployment experience as a couple, <sup>^</sup> = mobilization

## **Data Collection**

The researcher conducted and audiotaped nine conjoint, semi-structured interviews with participant couples. Informed consent was obtained prior to beginning the joint interview. Participants were invited to self-select pseudonyms to further maintain confidentiality and anonymity. Each partner completed a demographic questionnaire prior to beginning the joint interview. The guiding interview schedule consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit participants' perspectives and experiences relative to the deployment process. Interview lengths ranged from 74 to 196 minutes and averaged approximately 121 minutes. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim by a professional transcriptionist.

## **Analysis**

Data analysis was guided by a structured method of phenomenological analysis outlined by Moustakas (1994). This process included a series of steps designed to facilitate the development of individual and composite textural and structural descriptions, which were then integrated and used to encapsulate the overall essence of the experience of the deployment process for same-sex couples. The process included the following overarching stages of analysis: (a) phenomenological reduction, (b) imaginative variation and (c) synthesis of composite meanings and essences (Moustakas, 1994).

The data analysis began with a process referred to as horizontalization, through which every statement relevant to the topic of study was considered for its significance and treated as having equal worth (Moustakas, 1994). Five hundred and fifty-six significant statements related to the couples' experiences of deployment were identified within verbatim transcripts. Redundant or repeated statements were extracted, leaving the "invariant meaning units" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122), or horizons, of the couples' experience of deployment. Identified

invariant horizons were clustered into meaning units or themes. Themes were then synthesized to develop a description of *what* the participant couples experienced throughout the deployment process, referred to as the textural description (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2007). The individual textural descriptions were later used to summarize the structural description, which reflected the underlying dynamics of the couples' experience and the ways in which the setting or context influenced *how* the couples experienced the deployment process (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell, 2007). Textural and structural descriptions were then synthesized to derive the composite "essence" of each couple's experience of deployment, and were later used for the purposes of member checking. Composite textural-structural descriptions were also synthesized to capture the overall essence of the common lived experiences of same sex military couples navigating the deployment process, thereby fulfilling the purpose of phenomenological inquiry (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Validation Methods**

A number of methods to establish validity and credibility were employed throughout all phases of the study (Creswell, 2007). Apart from extensive bracketing, member checking was the primary means for establishing credibility. Member checking, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985) is "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314). Member checking is also consistent with the overarching goal of phenomenology, to remain connected to the experiences of research participants (Dahl & Boss, 2005). Composite textural-structural essences, narrative descriptions of the couples' experiences, were sent to each participant couple to review. All nine couples participated in this process by responding to the member checking email. The majority of participants were fully satisfied with the summary and two provided only minor revisions.

## **Subjectivity Statement**

In the reflexive spirit of phenomenology, the author wishes to note all experiences related to the phenomenon of study in an effort to be transparent about the role of the researcher and potential biases. The primary researcher identifies as a heterosexual female and has previous experience with military deployment as the spouse of a service member. The first author also identifies as an advocate of LGBTQ rights.

## **Results**

Three discrete and interrelated thematic categories emerged from the data: (a) deployment experience is context-dependent; (b) challenges associated with sexual minority status; and (c) learned resilience. Each over-arching category contained its own themes and subthemes. These themes capture the essence of how participant couples experienced the deployment processes during OIF and/or OEF. Aforementioned thematic categories are discussed below with verbatim quotes from transcripts included for further illustration.

### **Category 1: Deployment Experience is Context-dependent**

The category of *Deployment Experience is Context-dependent* encapsulates the varied and complex contexts in which the couples were embedded and how these contexts impacted their experience of the deployment process. Participants discussed the convergence of myriad contexts including the political climate, military culture, and various subcultures within their military experience such as those within their branch of service, military occupation specialty (MOS), military installation, and within the unit with which they deployed. Couples discussed the ways in which they thoughtfully and cautiously navigated the inherent variability in the enforcement of policies and within the military culture itself. “Reading” the atmosphere of the

unit and the general context was an essential component to operating within the various contexts of the deployment experience for seven of the nine couples.

**Political Context: DADT & DOMA.** All eighteen participants discussed the political context in which they experienced deployment, specifically noting the impact of DADT and DOMA. Five couples deployed during DADT; four deployed after the repeal but while DOMA was still in effect. Discussions of the prohibitive nature of these policies were prominent and closely tied to the category of *Challenges Associated with Sexual Minority Status*. It was within this political context that participants felt like “second-class citizens,” unable to serve openly and/or unable to receive federal recognition of their relationship. While couples’ experiences greatly varied depending on the timing of their tour, all participants discussed feeling constrained, isolated and discriminated against by said policies on some level. DADT weighed heavily on many participants while deployed, as the pervasive threat of discharge and the impact of the policy on their relationship loomed. Rick recounted how thoughts of his partner, JJ, and of the restrictive policy were ever-present during his time in Afghanistan:

I just wanted it all to be over with...That was the biggest thing. Because at that point, I didn’t see an end to DADT...every waking moment I was thinking about him...I start to think about our life, and I start to think about what life would be like if we were allowed to be more open. (Rick)

Navigating these policies was taxing both on the service member and on the couple relationship. As JJ described, “...you had to cover and mask everything. You were either absent or not able to show your emotions...it’s one of those things where it takes a toll on a relationship.”

While all participants discussed both DADT and DOMA, couples seemed to view DADT as more of a significant barrier to their overall experience as a military couple, and perceived

DOMA as an “unfair” impediment to rightful recognition, support and resources. All participants expressed a great sense of relief after the repeal of DADT, though many also described feelings of frustration around the fact that their relationships were not legitimized. Tom discussed his frustration around his husband, Bill, not being recognized as a spouse during his deployment:

At that point, we were happy that DADT was going and I wasn't going to get fired. That was more important. It still was in the back of my head that it just wasn't fair. I was doing the same job as everyone else...Having to think about that on top of everything else before deployment sucked. (Tom)

Efforts made by some participants to make life more livable under DADT heightened their experience of stress and worry throughout the deployment process. Two participants elected to obtain fraudulent “contract marriages” with platonic others so that they would be granted more privacy and the freedom to live as a couple. While this afforded more autonomy, it also complicated one couple's legal preparations prior to Jake's departure:

I have to make sure everything's like a domino effect. I have to make sure that the power of attorney is directly for him and not her so that way she doesn't turn around and do something...She can be that one person who can take everything away...I had to watch my back the entire time. (Jake)

Several participants compared DADT to other discrimination that LGB individuals are often subjected to, such as discrimination by some sects of organized religion and in more conservative areas of the country such as the “Bible Belt.” Many participants felt the policies and culture of the military exacerbated pre-existing minority stress. Reed discussed the way in which his partner, Mateo's prolonged experience of discrimination in the military differed from his own experience:

...You are told that you are not supposed to be a certain way. You're told it by your culture, your society, in some cases your parents, and then you're told it by your job that you can't be this way and you should hide. You deal with this for years and years and years. It takes a toll. It's interesting because – I shouldn't say it's interesting – but it's sad because Mateo is eight years younger than I am, but it's affected him in ways that hasn't affected me because he's been in the military for almost two decades and has had to be to a certain degree closeted, although I don't view him as being closeted at all. He's never really been closeted as an adult, but they've forced him...into a closet. (Reed)

Regardless of the political climate at the time, a majority of service member participants and their partners expressed feeling a sense of duty to serve and support our efforts overseas. Partners described feeling a great sense of pride in their deployed partner's service. Despite restrictive and discriminatory policies, over half of the participant couples expressed a strong commitment to the military.

**Military Culture.** Discussions of aspects of military culture, namely the “good ol’ boy” traditions and mentality, were also notable. Many participants perceived “traditional” military culture as largely unaccepting of sexual minorities. While most couples did not report overtly negative experiences attributed to homophobia within the military, many described feeling anxious, and in some cases fearful, about how they would be perceived. As Sue recounted, “It was after DADT was repealed...but I was still kind of nervous about coming out because the military is kind of like the good ol’ boys’ club. You hear the guys talk; they make jokes and stuff.” The degree to which couples experienced these heterosexist and/or homophobic notions was largely dependent on a number of subcultures including those of their branch of service, rank, MOS, military installation, and the unit with which they deployed.

Many participants viewed some branches as more progressive than others, specifically the Air Force and the Navy. The Army and Marine Corps were perceived as more traditionally heterosexist, as displayed masculinity was seen as indicative of military prowess. Several participants therefore perceived these branches as less accepting of sexual minorities. Within specific branches, some service members discussed the way in which their MOS heightened notions of hyper-masculinity. Jake described his experience in combat arms, "...in a combat world, it's one of the biggest things...because everyone's ego is so high; everyone has to be the man...everybody is rough, everybody has to be rough and they have to feel that way to be accepted by anybody." Tom and Mateo expressed similar concerns around their experience deploying with Special Forces, citing the "machismo" of the group as a potential indicator of how they may be perceived as gay service members.

...the unit I was about to join was not one where it was okay or accepting by any means. I was already trying to mentally prepare myself...I think it was much harder because, one: it was with the Army, and two: then I get there and the unit they send me with is Special Forces...I was already scared. I was already like: "Oh my God." (Mateo)

The subculture of the unit was also an important mediating factor in the couples' experience of the deployment process. Although DADT was still in effect for the majority of participant couples, the enforcement of policy was largely dependent on the atmosphere of the unit. Four participants described some units as more progressive and accepting than others, and reported feeling more comfortable and supported. Elizabeth shared her experience:

...when Don't Ask, Don't Tell was still around, it was kind of based on wherever you worked at. Some places...were really cool about it; didn't care. Some places you didn't

tell anyone. Some places only half the people knew. My last deployment, both my officers knew, my higher ups knew, half of the people I worked with knew. (Elizabeth)

Though some commands and units were more progressive than others, seven of the nine couples discussed the importance of “reading” the atmosphere of the unit or “testing the waters,” before identifying “safe” others with whom they could be open. “Reading” was especially important for service member participants during deployment given the ramifications of ‘telling’ under DADT. Megan explained the protective function of reading:

I feel out the culture a little bit and test the waters. Not that I am not willing to engage in those conversations...but I do like to at least know what I’m getting into...it was just some kind of case-by-case testing the waters. I never had any really overtly negative experiences with that, but mostly I think because I was cautious and could kind of feel the heat and back off before I really got burned. (Megan)

Many couples reported that reading was common practice outside of the military context as well

## **Category 2: Challenges Associated with Sexual Minority Status**

The category of *Challenges Associated with Sexual Minority Status* summarizes the various ways in which participants felt their experiences of deployment differed from those of heterosexual couples. All couples described a number of both subjective and objective barriers, which exacerbated pre-existing deployment-related stressors and further complicated their experiences throughout all phases of deployment. Four themes emerged from such discussions: *Feelings of Fear, Feelings of Isolation, Lack of Recognition, and Constraints around Open Communication and Participation in Events.*

**Feelings of fear.** Some degree of fear permeated the experiences of all participant couples at some point throughout the deployment process regardless of the political climate at

the time. General feelings of fear for participants' safety while deployed were compounded by the fear attributed to their sexual minority status. Ingrained and arguably dictated by policy, fear was a driving force for most participants as they navigated the deployment process. Two subthemes emerged from this theme: *Fear of serving openly/being outed* and *Fear of associating with LGB personnel*.

Most couples discussed some level of fear around either serving openly or being outed during DADT. The ever-present threat of discharge and being "busted" weighed heavily upon both service members and their partners. The fear of and/or inability to serve openly led four participants to present themselves as straight or single to avoid unwanted scrutiny. As Elizabeth described, "they just assume that you're single essentially because...you don't say you have a girlfriend, you either make up the fact that they're a boy or you say that you're single." The straight presentation led to some awkward and unpleasant experiences for Sue:

I did get hit on by men while I was over there so I had to kind of like push them off because they thought I was single. I presented myself as single because I was afraid to tell people about her. (Sue)

Often deployed with personnel they were not familiar with, many participants chose to err on the side of caution and remain closeted before identifying "safe" others in their unit with whom they could be open. Six of the nine deployed partners were able to find to at least one "safe" person during their tours.

A number of participants, predominantly those with a longer history of service, discussed the ways in which the long-term effects of serving under DADT reverberated following repeal. Four participant service members chose to remain closeted, or "semi-closeted" through their pre-deployment training or throughout the entirety of their tour. Though Tom served openly once he

was forward deployed, he discussed how he reverted to a semi-closeted existence when he began training with a new unit, “I spent so much time worrying or thinking that I knew what other people would think or do...I kind of went back to that in that training situation.”

Many partners shared this concern and feared that their deployed partner might face discrimination and harassment while they were away from essential support systems. A number of partners therefore supported the service member’s choice to remain closeted following repeal. Despite her desire to be more involved as a military partner, Peggy supported Sue’s decision to remain closeted:

She was having doubts about coming out...I didn’t want her to be somewhat harassed when she was deployed, so I was like: “Okay, fine. Whatever you want to do... She’s going to be so far from family and friends, so just wanted to do what is best for her.

(Peggy)

Central to couples’ experience of fear during the deployment process was fear around communication being monitored. This was a prominent concern for six of the nine couples, and was heightened for three couples who described the fear as “paranoia.” With the knowledge that all phone conversations and email could be monitored, couples experienced feelings of anxiety, fear, and worry at the possibility of “busting” themselves. Jennifer described her experience with Megan’s first deployment:

...we were worried about: “Were they listening to our phone calls? Were they reading our letters? Were they reading our emails?” Especially with Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell and her never having been deployed before, she didn’t know what it was going to be like being over there... (Jennifer)

Couples had to be constantly aware of the way in which they were communicating and their surroundings. As Mateo recounted, “I had to pay attention to where I was, I had to pay attention in a room full of people that eavesdrops on my conversation. Am I by myself? What’s going on?” These constraints added a layer of complexity to an already stressful experience.

Another theme central to almost half of the participant couples’ experience of fear was the fear of associating with LGB personnel. Four deployed partners discussed the danger inherent in associating with other known or suspected gay personnel during their tours under DADT, as this would make the service member “guilty by association.” As Megan described:

I’ve always felt and I’ve had it reaffirmed to me...that the most dangerous person to a gay person during a deployment is someone else who might either be gay or questioning their sexuality and be closeted themselves because... their motivation would be to kind of seek me out as a person to out as a protective measure for themselves. I was very cautious. I was very paranoid. (Megan)

Many felt that this was a missed opportunity to find a place of community and support, and described this dilemma as a “double-edged sword.” While four participants expressed fear around this, one participant, Mateo, found the benefit of finding support through this “underground network” of gay personnel far outweighed the risk:

...every ship I’ve been to, every deployment I’ve been to. You find the one and it’s usually the flamboyant, “I don’t give a crap” person. If you’re brave enough to become friends with them...Because of that friendship, I was able to get through that deployment... Between Kevin and I, like I said, strength in numbers. Now you got more than one gay person, you got two gay people reading you; they’ll leave you alone. That was how we took care of each other. (Mateo)

**Feelings of isolation.** The majority of couples described feelings of isolation throughout the deployment process. Participants' experiences of isolation were related to their feelings of fear and to the political context, as many felt constrained from forming relationships and accessing support due to policy. Isolation was felt on three levels: deployed partners' *isolation from the unit*, partners' *isolation from the military community*, and the *couples' experience of isolation*.

Over half of the deployed partners described feeling inhibited in their ability to fully bond with their unit due to DADT. Participants discussed the paradoxes inherent in military life, namely the camaraderie paradox (Trivette, 2010), as "living a lie," "leading a double life," and being "social yet distant." Rick described his experience of isolation:

I learned to compartmentalize. I'm loyal to my friends; I'll be there when they need me, but they can't ever know this life of me...loyal to the corps, I will do what the corps tells me, but it can't ever know this part of me. (Rick)

Deployment exacerbated this sense of isolation for many participants. As Megan recounted, "There's this really strange social dynamic of being deployed; you're really never alone, yet there's this constant sense of isolation in that there isn't any kind of depth of relationship, you don't know these people well."

The inability to share significant portions of their lives and identities was difficult for many participants. The majority of deployed partners reported that the most difficult aspect of their felt sense of isolation was their inability to be public with and discuss their relationship. Surrounded by public displays of and conversations about other unit members' relationships yet unable to share their own, participants often felt distanced from their unit, and at times, from their relationship with their partner. Elizabeth shared her experience:

...we're supposed to trust each other and supposed to work with each other, and put our lives in each other's hands, but yet, I can't tell you the most important thing about my life. It's like you are so busy talking about your significant other, but yet, you won't be accepting of my significant other. You really won't trust them as much essentially because you don't let them in as much I guess...it makes your relationship seem less important than...straight relationships...when you can't talk about them, kind of just makes them seem a little less important than they actually are in your life. (Elizabeth)

Five partners expressed a similar experience of isolation from the military community at large. Just as many deployed partners had to be closeted, so too did many partners at home. JJ described his experience of being a military partner during DADT as being, "the face behind the curtain in the Wizard of Oz." Five partners expressed sadness and frustration around their inability to socialize or bond with other military spouses or attend support group meetings. Partners' isolation from military support heightened feelings of stress and led to feelings of depression, anxiety and loneliness for some participants. A number of their deployed partners reported feelings of guilt around their partner's isolation from military support. Mateo shared his experience with Reed: "I felt terrible because...I could not tell him to utilize the resources that other straight families could use at the time. To contact the ombudsman...I couldn't tell him to go to family support."

While the majority of couples reported individual experiences of isolation for both the deployed partner and the partner at home, four couples discussed a *relational experience of isolation* as well. Couples' experience of isolation was more pronounced during pre-deployment and upon redeployment, as couples were left to navigate myriad deployment-related challenges on their own. JJ described this experience as, "standing on an island by yourself." Aware that

they could not turn to official military channels for support and information, these couples were tasked with completing pre-deployment preparations and coping with reintegration difficulties by themselves. Couples described experiencing feelings of frustration and anxiety around their experience of isolation during the deployment process. Rick described his experience with JJ:

We knew nobody else who was going through the situation we were...we were treading through this alone...we had each other. We knew no other couples that were going through the same struggle...we thought we were it in the entire world going through it alone. (Rick)

Another couple described the complexity, anxiety and stress inherent in finding others who could relate to their experience:

...being able to talk about missing each other to people who understand. It was probably the hardest for both of us I think. The people that I had to confide in didn't have military ties and the people she had to confide in had to be safe and had to be in a place where she wasn't worried about being listened to or them running and telling somebody that could kill her career. That's really the biggest thing, the safety and that anxiety of not knowing who to talk to and not having somebody who can fully relate. (Jennifer)

**Lack of recognition.** Central to the experience of all participant couples were feelings of stress, sadness and frustration around the lack of recognition of their relationship. This was true of couples that deployed both before and after the repeal of DADT, as DOMA restricted participants from being federally recognized as military dependents. While all couples discussed the implications of not being recognized, the four couples who deployed following repeal reported that this was the most significant barrier to their experience of deployment as a same-sex couple. Participants discussed both subjective and objective implications related to their lack

of recognition. Two subthemes emerged from such discussions: *Feeling Marginalized* and *Being Prohibited*.

Both deployed partners and the partners at home expressed a general sense of feeling invalidated and marginalized both by the military and society at large. Petunia described her experienced of feeling ignored by her unit during Bailey's deployment:

I think not only in the Navy but in society...lesbian couples are not taken as seriously. "Oh, you're just two girls that are together." It's not taken as seriously as a heterosexual couple...Or: "You guys aren't really committed to each other. You're just having fun."...I feel like that's how it was kind of looked upon..."Well, they're just...They're not married yet, and they're probably just having fun, going through a phase, whatever they are." I just feel that our relationship wasn't legitimized at all. (Petunia)

The partners-at-home described feeling that they were not respected or recognized for the difficulties they faced during the partners' deployment. A sense of frustration around the "unfairness" of the lack of recognition and benefits permeated many couples' experiences, as they were "doing the same job as everyone else," yet were treated differently.

When you're doing the same job. She was next to the people doing the same job that were getting benefits, but me back home and I'm sure her as well feeling like a second-class citizen. Like we weren't as good I guess or weren't good enough to get all those benefits and support. That's hard to swallow, that's a hard pill to swallow. (Petunia)

Over and over, participants discussed a variety of difficulties surrounding the logistics of the deployment process which were further complicated by their inability to claim their partner or spouse as a dependent or next-of-kin. Of these difficulties, most couples described the restrictions around partners' access to information, financial benefits, and legal protections as the

most anxiety provoking and frustrating. Couples who deployed during DADT reported more anxiety around such restrictions, particularly around completing the necessary legal protections prior to deployment. Deployed partners were tasked with attempting to enact legal protections (i.e. wills and power of attorneys) for their partner with the ever-present threat of discharge looming. Several participants reported feeling extremely anxious during this process, as they attempted to protect their partner without inviting scrutiny and suspicion for listing a “friend” or “roommate” as the executor of their wills. Mateo described his experience:

I went through Navy legal to get the power of attorney, they were like: “Well, who’s the executor?” “Who’s going to be this?” “Well, who is Reed Jacobs?” I’m like: “Well, what do you mean?” “Well, what is his..? How do you know Reed Jacobs...You have your roommate as the executor of your will, you have your roommate as gets all of your beneficiary money and in charge of all your finances if you pass away?” (Mateo)

The majority of couples also reported feelings of anxiety around the limited access to necessary information. Without being able to list their partner as their next-of-kin and/or to be public with their relationship, many deployed partners expressed concern around their ability to be notified if something were to happen at home. As Bos’n expressed, “If something were to happen at home, how was I ever going to explain..? How would I be able to respond to some sort of emergency at home when I didn’t..? I had no home, I had no family.” Partners at home consistently reported a similar fear—that they would not be notified by official military channels if anything were to happen to their partner while in theater. While most couples arranged for their family members, those listed as official next-of-kin, to relay important information to the partners at home, many also expressed concern that this would fall through. Petunia described

her experience: “What if her mom hated me? I wouldn’t know if she was dead until it came out in the paper...that was difficult for me.”

**Constraints around open communication and participation in events.** Six couples reported experiencing constraints around freely communicating as partners during deployment. Constantly aware of their surroundings and of the potential for communication to be monitored, couples developed a number of strategies to avert unwanted scrutiny. Participants often resorted to “treating each other like buddies” or like “casual friends” to avoid suspicion from monitors. Several deployed partners discussed a decision-making process whereby they weighed the inherent risk of open communication and their need for connection. Megan explained:

I weighed that balance of how to protect myself under DADT versus what my own core emotional needs were at the time, and in trying to find a way to do that and balance that, I really kind of erred on the side of protecting Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell...I kept it very surfaced...Very superficial. Three, four, six months of very superficial conversation with your partner is a little bit wearing on the spirit, more than a little bit. (Megan)

While keeping conversations superficial evoked feelings of frustration and stress for many participants, couples expressed that their sense of connection was not affected. As JJ articulated, “In communication, we were buddy, but in the actual connection, it was not.”

Many couples also utilized pseudonyms and codes as protective measures so that they could more freely communicate as partners. This was a complicated task for several couples, as the assumed identity had to be interwoven throughout all means of communication, i.e. letters, email accounts, packages, etc. Participants discussed how these strategies enabled them to share their emotional experiences and express their love for one another. However, the use of codes

and pseudonyms was often taxing on both partners. For one couple, the use of a pseudonym lent a disingenuous and uncomfortable quality to their conversations. As Mateo recounted:

I sit down, I read my letter, I'm all excited and I'm happy, and I'm damn near in tears, and then you get to the last thing: "Love Camille." It's like: "Oh." I don't know, in a way it was almost like I don't want a letter from Camille, I want a letter from Reed. Instantly, I read that one name and I was like: "This is not from Reed. It's from Camille." That particular name signified everything that I couldn't talk about and so I didn't like it. Every time I get an email from him and I'm reading the email, and I can see his face and I can hear his words, and then I get to the end and it's signed "Camille" and I'm like done. (Mateo)

His husband Reed agreed:

It makes everything just feel, even just having a fake name, it just makes everything feel so disingenuous and sort of like...It's a really negative feeling...You could still be yourself in some ways and talk, but then you have to pretend that you're not who you are. It's just weird. It takes the veracity, it takes the truth out of what you're communicating in a certain way; it sort of demeans it...(Reed)

Other couples expressed concern that they would not be able to fully convey their feelings through the use of codes.

If anything were to ever happen and the last words that I got to speak to him were: 'You know,' I would still know they meant: 'I love you,' but would he really know that I meant that I love you? Because at that point, you're taking [an] empirical leap to figure out the rest of the conversation. (JJ)

The constraints around open communication were considered the most frustrating aspects of the deployment experience by several couples. A number of partners reported that the separation from their partner coupled with the inability to freely communicate exacerbated preexisting deployment-related stressors. Some deployed partners described reaching a point at which they no longer cared about the potential consequences and became more “gutsy” in their conversations in an effort to “maintain [their] sanity.” Despite the fear and stress caused by these constraints, many couples expressed an understanding of the circumstances under DADT. They understood the risks inherent in communicating as partners and knew the constraints were temporary.

Though the majority of participant couples reported an inability to openly participate in military events throughout their career, five couples discussed these constraints in relation to their experience of deployment. Most couples experienced feelings of frustration around their inability to openly participate in deployment related events such as Family Readiness group events, Yellow Ribbon events, farewells and homecomings. While participants expressed feelings of fear and isolation around their participation, many participated as “friends” “brothers” and “brothers-in law” to avoid scrutiny.

The emotional toll of this barrier varied among couples and was largely dependent on the political climate at the time. Some couples did not experience these constraints as overly upsetting. For instance, Peggy and Sue, although they did not feel comfortable reuniting publicly as partners, expressed appreciation around Peggy’s ability to participate as “the best friend.” Sue explained, “I was happy that she was able to come, and [I] could just get off the plane and hug her. I didn’t kiss her at the airport, but...just being able to see her...touch her, and hold her was great.”

Feelings of stress and anxiety were particularly heightened during farewells and homecomings for couples that deployed during DADT. Couples had to be constantly aware of their surroundings and to present themselves as if they were casual friends, careful not to be too affectionate or openly expressive with their emotions. Participants expressed feeling robbed of the opportunity to have the “typical soldier’s farewell.” JJ described his experience with Rick:

...that was probably the hardest part where everybody else was in the parking lot wishing their soldier goodbye, giving them their hugs, their farewells, their kisses, things like that all we could do is literally shake hands and pull away...There’s no hug, there’s no smile, there’s no nothing...It’s just the: “Thanks for giving me a ride,” and a wave. That was probably the biggest crushing feeling ever because where everybody else is crying, and hugging, and just they’re there and they can actually stay – you are, if you get out of the vehicle and you stand there and you wait, you’re weird; you’re the: “What is this? (JJ)

Reunions were extremely difficult for three couples, as they discussed feeling overwhelmed with relief and happiness that they were reunited, yet felt afraid to have “too long of a hug.” As Reed recounted:

The first time I met you on the pier...I was so excited, and it didn’t even occur to me...Until you were standing in front of me, I can’t, I couldn’t even give you a hug...I was like: “We have to go right now because I can’t deal with this.” You literally feel like your heart is being ripped in half. It’s so hard...it’s stupid hard. (Reed)

### **Category 3: Learned Resilience**

The final over-arching thematic category, *Learned Resilience*, captures the ways in which participant couples were able to cope with the various distinctive challenges related to their experience of deployment as same-sex couples. Though many participants felt that the

aforementioned limitations were significant, most felt that they got by without them.

Participants perceived themselves as capable of enduring the stress inherent in deployment and many expressed an abiding faith that their relationship would survive. Couples displayed remarkable resilience in the face of discrimination, adversity and typical deployment-related stress. Resilience, many couples felt, was essential to successfully navigating deployment as a same-sex couple, and was something that was learned over time.

You learn resilience. There's so much in place designed to knock you down...we really figured out a way to solidify our life despite all the laws that were working against us, all the things that were designed to either keep us apart or keep us down or keep us excluded. (Rick)

Three themes emerged: *Developing strategies to cope with distinctive challenges*, *Deployment made us stronger*, and *Factors related to resilience*.

**Developing strategies to cope with distinctive challenges.** Couples discussed a variety of ways in which they developed strategies to cope with unique challenges accompanying their sexual minority status. Participants acknowledged the importance of being resourceful both in adapting to the barriers enforced by policy and in coping with normative deployment-related stress. All partners discussed the significance of accessing alternative support in mediating feelings of fear, anxiety and loneliness. Couples recognized that a mutually supportive relationship, and networks of friends, trusted colleagues, and family helped them to adapt to the barriers and hardship inherent in their experiences of being same-sex military couples. These factors were essential in maintaining participants' wellbeing throughout the stress of deployment. Two subthemes emerged from discussions around coping: *Turning to each other* and *Finding support in others*.

Significant to couples' experience of resilience was their ability to turn to one another for emotional support. Eight couples reported that turning to their partner for support was both meaningful and paramount to their ability to cope. As Rick shared, "We did support each other. All we had was each other. I had to make sure that I called him whenever I could." Although not all couples were able to explicitly provide care and support through communication during their separation, most couples expressed feeling connected to their partner as a united front throughout the process. Without the ability to access support or resources, most couples relied on one another to cope with difficult periods prior to and following deployment. Susan shared her experience with Bos'n:

I do remember that there was some adjustment when Bos'n first came back...I remember thinking they provide support services sometimes. It was one of those moments I was like: "Oh, there is support services and people talk about that process if you're straight. Never mind. We'll weather it together." (Susan)

Several participants described feeling "used to" finding support elsewhere throughout their experience of deployment and life in general.

We've always just kind of been used to finding it elsewhere, and talking to each other, and keeping ourselves as sane and healthy as we can by doing that, by finding that support and turning to each other when we can. I don't know that there's anything else we could have done. (Jennifer)

Finding support through others was considered essential to most couples' experience of deployment. While participants' ability to find and access support was often mediated by the political climate at the time, most deployed participants were able to find at least one "safe" unit member with whom they could be open. Although away from their primary support systems

deployed partners' ability to discuss their partners with "safe" unit members was beneficial in helping them cope with the separation. Elizabeth shared her experience of finding support within her unit while deployed under DADT:

...I had guys that I could talk to, and knew her, and had met her before so it was easier for me. It's hard to not be able to talk about your significant other...I think it was a lot easier for me because I could talk about her...She wasn't just the person I had held in my closet and couldn't talk about. (Elizabeth)

Sue discussed a similar experience of finding support after coming out to another unit member, which was an anxiety-provoking yet ultimately worthwhile experience: "Then he was somebody I could talk to about Peggy...He was the only person I could talk to about her." Connection to "safe" others seemed to be immensely important to participants, as these relationships helped to lessen deployed partners' feelings of isolation and loneliness. Similarly, connection to meaningful friendships and support systems were also paramount to the partners at home. Though many couples discussed the support garnered from family members, most partners at home relied primarily on close friends during their partner's absence.

One couple, Tom and Bill, received meaningful support through Tom's squadron following the repeal of DADT. The couple expressed immense gratitude for the support of the squadron and reported that they felt their experience of unit support was fairly unique. Though Bill was not considered a military dependent due to DOMA, the squadron made concerted efforts to include him in support activities and events during Tom's tour in Afghanistan. Bill described his experience of receiving support from other military spouses:

The Spouses' Club invited me to everything...If they were going to do something on base, they would try to make arrangements to come pick me up, or meet me at the gate, or do

whatever they needed to get me on base. They were a really good group of people...  
They've been through deployments...so they knew what I was going through as well.  
(Bill)

Though Bill considers himself relatively independent, his involvement in the Spouses' Club provided a forum through which he could share his experiences with others who understood.

A significant support to six couples was found in the LGBT community, through covert networks of LGB personnel and via established support groups such as the American Military Partner Association (AMPA). Involvement in this community was important for both deployed partners and partners at home. Sue expressed how meaningful this support was for herself and Peggy:

I feel like our community is pretty strong, so she was able to rely on all those friends for support...It's...a very small community and we're very tight-knit...Being able to rely on them for support was good, they're almost like a second family...They're the only ones I was really able to talk to about what was going on with me and Peggy. (Sue)

Many partners discussed a "strength in numbers" quality to the network of LGB personnel and described the way in which this community "looked out for" and protected each other. Sam shared his experience of feeling supported by this network while Jake was in Afghanistan:

It was scary, but we all took care of each other. There's...[a] pretty good close-knit [group] of us here, not so much of partnerships, but just soldiers...that we're close to and they were deployed...we all look out for each other. (Sam)

The covert network of LGB personnel was immensely important for Reed and Mateo during Mateo's tour in Iraq. Through his connection with his "battle-buddy," Kevin, Mateo connected

with another gay service member who was in charge of monitoring communication. Mateo described the way in which the monitor protected him:

He basically told me that if he's on watch... "Feel free to use the phone." So we would.

I knew his schedule so...I knew I could call home and talk to Reed and we were fine...

Because of that friendship, I was able to get through that deployment. (Mateo)

Through the LGBT community, covert networks of LGB personnel, and involvement in support groups, couples found support and connection and were better able to cope with the stress of deployment.

Couples also discussed the ways in which they relied upon family members and "allies on the inside" to relay important information to the partners at home. Finding alternative ways to access necessary information was a prominent adaptive strategy for participant couples, and seemed to play an important role in helping the partners at home cope with their inability to openly and fully participate as military spouses. The majority of participant couples relied on family members, those that could be listed as 'next of kin,' to relay information to the partners at home. Deployed partners who expressed distrust or felt distant from extended family often introduced their partners to "safe" and trusted others within their military network to serve as a resource during times of uncertainty.

**Deployment made us stronger.** Perhaps the most prominent and poignant theme was the shared feeling that their experience of deployment made them stronger. All eighteen participants unequivocally reported that their experience of deployment strengthened their bond and deepened their felt sense of connection with their partner. Though their experiences upon return were not without difficulty, couples felt they were largely able to adapt to the stress of reintegration with patience, care and mutual understanding. Some couples felt closer to their

partners during and after deployment than they had ever been previously. Five couples acknowledged that the visceral awareness of their partners' absence coupled with the concern for their loved one's safety increased their felt sense of appreciation during and following deployment. Petunia shared her experience during Bailey's tour:

Especially when she first left, I was just like: "Wow, I don't want to spend a day without her for the rest of my life." I think it just makes you appreciate those little things whereas couples get...lost in day-to-day stuff and they don't appreciate all these little things that their partners do for them...it just made me appreciate her that much more and want to be with her that much more. (Petunia)

Their lived experiences of hardship, adversity and heightened stress affirmed the strength of their relationships and gave them reassurance that their relationships were "not easily broken," and that they could face future deployments and challenges. Deployments were viewed by many as a "test of their relationship," while others felt that the deployment(s) solidified preexisting strengths within their relationships. As Jennifer explained:

I think our relationship was going to be strong no matter what, but I think the deployments kind of helped us figure out what it is that makes us strong. I think we would be as strong whether we had those or not. (Jennifer)

Many couples compared their experience of deployment to other difficult experiences throughout their relationship. Sue shared her experience with Bos'n: "We've certainly been through the wringer with various challenges in our relationship. This was one...Not the biggest one by any means, but we proved to ourselves that we can weather it and still be together." Several participants also expressed that their experience of deployment helped them to grow as

individuals as well. Deployment, for these participants, was reflected on as an opportunity to learn about themselves and their relationship.

**Factors related to resilience.** Couples identified a number of personal and relational factors related to the strength of their relationship and their ability to endure the stress of deployment and marginalization. Most couples felt that trust and commitment to the relationship were central to their experiences of the deployment process. Though several participants expressed some level of fear that deployment would negatively impact their relationship, most felt strongly that their relationship could withstand the separation. Other couples felt that their general ability to openly communicate, particularly about their emotional experience, helped them to adapt to the stress and separation. Several participants also felt that their independence and individual resilience contributed to their relational resilience. Bill shared:

I think a lot of that has to do with our relationship and the kind of relationship we have. We weren't two halves that made a whole. We were two wholes that came together as a partnership and came together to...share a life together...there's a big difference there.

(Bill)

While most couples felt that being a same-sex military couple was fundamentally disadvantageous, several couples discussed a number of unique advantages to experiencing deployment as a same-sex couple. Tom discussed how the fact that they've had to fight to have equal rights and recognition helps him value his relationship more:

I think some of that goes back to discussions we've had...about gay marriage versus straight marriage and the fact that we've kind of had to fight where we are.

When you have to fight for what you have, and who you are, and how you're recognized,

I think you probably put more of an investment into it. (Tom)s

Reed shared a similar sentiment regarding DADT: “I think that for the most part being discriminated against is disadvantageous, I will say that having...that sort of secret...it can sort of lend a special quality that makes things even more precious.” Other couples felt that flexible gender roles, or lack thereof, were a unique advantage.

For our relationship, what I love about it is there’s no gender roles, like there’s no: she should be doing dishes while I’m outside or vice versa. We do all of the roles. I like to cook, so I cook more. It’s not necessarily I have to cook because I’m the feminine part of the relationship or something like that. If I want to buy her flowers, I can go buy her flowers. I think that definitely helped. (Dawn)

Several couples also discussed the importance of the support of the LGBT community, and felt that support from this “second family” was a unique advantage for same-sex couples during the deployment process.

## Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that LGB service members and their partners face many of the same deployment-related challenges as heterosexual couples as well as a myriad of unique challenges due to their stigmatized minority status. The impact of these distinctive stressors largely depended on the political climate at the time, particularly the enforcement of DADT and DOMA, with couples deploying under DADT reporting more feelings of fear and isolation. While these distinctive barriers often exacerbated deployment-related stressors, these couples developed adaptive coping strategies to mitigate the impact of constraints and felt that the experience of deployment strengthened their bond. These findings thus demonstrate the vulnerability and resilience of same-sex military couples experiencing deployment, lending support to literature on the minority stress processes in LGB populations (Meyer, 2003).

All couples reported experiencing varying levels of anxiety, fear, strain, changes in communication, heightened stress, and reintegration challenges. These findings are consistent with previous research (Allen et al., 2011; Baptist et al., 2011; Knobloch, Ebata, McGlaughlin, & Ogolsky, 2013) and demonstrate that same-sex couples experience relational stressors and processes comparable to heterosexual couples throughout the deployment process. Consistent with past work (Baptist et al., 2011; Karney & Crown, 2007), despite the strain of deployment, couples identified a number of positive aspects to their experience including a deeper sense of emotional connection and appreciation, and a sense of fulfillment in serving our country.

Couples experienced a host of distinctive challenges related to their stigmatized minority status and to the political climate at the time of the tour. Themes around barriers related to their minority status were generally consistent with past research indicating that DADT impeded unit cohesion and lead to feelings of stress, fear and anxiety (Frank, 2004; RAND, 2010; Trivette,

2010). Consistent with Frank (2004), participants reported that these stressors were heightened during deployment when policies led to feelings of fear, isolation, heightened stress and constraints around communication/participation in events. Most couples reported feeling isolated from support from the military community and at times from each other due to various constraints, which often increased stress for both partners. Consistent with Allen et al. (2011), partners reported higher levels of stress when they felt uncertain of how to access support and information due to both DADT and DOMA. Couples who felt freer to openly communicate and access unit support reported more positive experiences overall and less feelings of isolation. These findings are consistent with previous research that underscores the importance of communication between partners (Baptist, et al., 2011) and perceived social support in mediating deployment-related stressors (Allen et al., 2011). Perceived social support, especially from the LGBT community, has also been shown to help LGB couples cope with minority stress processes (Riggle et al., 2008). Several deployed partners and the partners-at-home found this unique support particularly meaningful during their experiences. Despite the risk of associating with other LGB service members, a number of participants acknowledged the support of this covert network during their tour. This finding lends support to past research indicating the importance of the underground network of LGB personnel in helping sexual minorities navigate the paradoxes inherent in serving during DADT (Trivette, 2010).

Existing research suggests that LGB personnel may be more vulnerable to a number of mental health issues such as PTSD, depression and anxiety (Cochran et al., 2013). There is also a clear association between combat exposure and an increased risk of mental health issues (Hoge et al., 2004; Milliken, Auchterlonie, & Hoge, 2007). Results of this study suggest that LGB personnel may be at an even greater risk for developing mental health issues during deployment

if they are fearful of open service and feel isolated from support and resources. Future research in this area is warranted.

Participant couples demonstrated resiliency on two distinct levels: in their ability to adapt to distinctive challenges related to their minority status, and in their ability to sustain relationships through the heightened stress of deployment. It is possible that the eligibility requirements could have drawn couples that were naturally resilient in that they had to demonstrate strength and resolve in order to endure the deployment process. Nonetheless, the current findings lend support to literature on the resilience of sexual minorities (Kwon, 2013; Meyer, 2003; Russell & Richards, 2003) and military couples (Riggs & Riggs, 2011). Often unable to access support within the military community, partners relied primarily on each other, and found alternative support through close friends, the LGBT community, “safe” allies, and extended family. This method of coping has been identified in past research that found that same-sex couples created specific support systems to cope with adverse minority stress processes (Rostosky, Riggle, Gray, & Hatton, 2007).

A significant contribution of this study is the inclusion of the perspective of the service members’ partners and the ability to capture the couples’ joint perspective. This is the first known study to investigate the experience of same-sex military couples and deployment from the perspective of committed couples. Findings illustrate how DADT and DOMA impacted the couples’ experiences of the deployment process on both subjective and objective levels. Both deployed partners and partners-at-home reported experiences of isolation and fear, which were exacerbated and perpetuated by aforementioned policies. These policies largely governed the way in which couples related and accessed essential support during the process. However, couples developed adaptive coping strategies to maintain a sense of connection and access

support in spite of the restrictive political climate. Results of the study suggest that the adaptive utilization of internal and relational resources influence how LGB military couples experience deployment.

## **Implications**

Results of this study have numerous implications for the military, policymakers and mental health professionals. The results of this study underscore the importance of access to support and resources for both deployed partners and the partners-at-home during deployment. While recent years have marked significant gains for LGB service members with the repeal of DADT and DOMA, there will continue to be discrepancies in access to resources and uncertainty around federal recognition until LGB couples can marry in every state in the nation.

Policymakers and military leaders alike should be mindful of the negative impact of many couples' *Lack of Recognition* and take measures to ensure the family readiness of same-sex military families. Additionally, though the majority of participants reported no overtly negative experiences of harassment, many expressed concern around ongoing discrimination despite recent policy changes. As suggested by Cochran et al. (2013), the military could implement nondiscrimination policies concerning sexual orientation and identity to protect LGB personnel from potential harassment and discrimination. Equally important is the cultural shift within the military regarding sexual minorities and military service. Though there has been a gradual shift toward acceptance among military personnel in recent years (Jacobs, 2005; Moradi & Miller, 2009), some negative attitudes surrounding sexual minorities and military service will persist so long as certain dominant discourses within military culture remain and are ascribed to (Herek & Belkin, 2006). After years of silently sacrificing for our country, the time has come for both the military and society at large to actively seek to understand their experiences.

The findings of this study have important clinical implications for couple and family therapists, as more same-sex military couples and their families may seek mental health services following the repeal of DADT and DOMA. First and foremost, the results underscore the importance of sensitive, culturally competent treatment of same-sex military couples. It is imperative that clinicians develop an understanding of the various political and cultural contexts in which these couples are embedded and the individual and relational implications of said contexts and policies. It is necessary to understand the risk inherent in having a LGB identity under DADT, and to be aware that couples may still be wary of open service and/or fear ongoing discrimination. Clinicians should therefore assess the degree of integration of service members' LGB identity and relationship with their military identity. In addition to assessing for coping with normative deployment-related stressors, clinicians should assess for couples' experience of challenges related to their sexual minority status, which often serve to exacerbate pre-existing stressors. As demonstrated by the findings, access to support services and social support are paramount during deployment and help to mediate feelings of isolation. It is therefore important to assess both partners' experience of isolation and their access to support from both military channels and from close others such as those within the LGBTQ community, friends, unit members and family. Findings also demonstrate the resilience of same-sex military couples in their ability to cope with both normative deployment-related stressors and marginalization due to their stigmatized minority status. Clinicians can support same-sex military couples in building upon the resilience within the couple relationship (see Porter & Gutierrez, 2012) through deployment and beyond.

## **Strengths, Limitations, & Future Research**

One strength of this study is the breadth of military experience (e.g., rank, MOS, length of service, branch of service) reflected in the sample. This allowed for an in-depth exploration of common elements across a wide range of military and deployment experiences. Conducting conjoint interviews was both a strength and limitation of this research. While joint interviews afforded an opportunity to capture the relational essence of deployment, it is possible that participants felt uncomfortable sharing more sensitive aspects of their experience in the presence of their partner. It is possible that data gathered would have been different if adjunctive individual interviews were offered in an effort to reduce potential self-censoring. Limitations also may have resulted from the method of recruitment in which advocacy and support groups were asked to promote the study. All participant couples were involved in LGBTQ activism and advocacy groups on some level. As a result, the resultant sample may not be representative of the broader LGB military population.

A number of other participant characteristics may have also served to impact the data set and should thus be considered when interpreting the study's findings. The study included results from three dual military couples, and from one couple in which the partner-at-home had prior military service experience. Overall, dual military participant couples perceived their military service as a unique advantage in that non-deployed partners had a better understanding of the deployment process and military culture in general. Therefore, couples' dual military status likely impacted their perceptions and beliefs around deployment as well as their adaptation to various deployment-related stressors. The study also included results from one couple, couple 3, whose characteristics were relatively unique with regard to age, years together, retirement status, and mobilization experience. While this couple's experience of mobilization did not

significantly differ from the experiences of other participant couples, it is possible that aforementioned characteristics served to impact their experience of the deployment process. For instance, this couple may have been more accustomed to adapting to various challenges and stressors associated with both their minority status and military service given their more advanced age and length of relationship. Finally, while the sample was relatively diverse with regard to the ethnicities of participants, the researcher did not collect data on the convergence of the minority stress of ethnic minorities and sexual minorities. Though these couples did not report overt challenges associated with their ethnic minority status, it is possible that these factors served to impact their experience. Future research in this area is warranted.

Research on sexual minorities in the military is still in its infancy. Future research is needed to better understand the ‘silent sacrifices’ of these modern military couples and families. Given that participants’ experiences were largely dependent on the political climate, research investigating the experience of same-sex military families navigating recent policy changes is needed. Future research should also aim to explore the experience of same-sex military couples deploying after the fall of DOMA.

### **Conclusion**

Though the silent sacrifices of our nation’s estimated 66,000 to 78,000 (Frank, 2010; RAND, 2010) LGB personnel have received increasing political and media attention in recent years, the true extent of their sacrifices during OEF and OIF remain unknown. In this study, nine couples reflected upon their collective experience of deployments during OEF and OIF. The essence of these couples’ experiences is one of vulnerability, commitment, and resilience. Their lived experiences represent a small sample of a significant, yet understudied, minority group.

However, their stories provide meaningful insight into minority military couples who were able to sustain meaningful relationships in spite of incredible stress and marginalization.

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Appendix A  
Recruitment Flyer

Do you and your same-sex partner want to share your story of military deployment?



For my thesis, I am currently recruiting same-sex couples to participate in a research study to reflect on their past experiences of military deployment and its impact on their relationship. In return, you will be compensated for sharing your story!



<http://www.stipes.com>

Interested couples should contact **Ansley Fraser** at [aefraser@vt.edu](mailto:aefraser@vt.edu), or [757-537-4567](tel:757-537-4567) for more information

**What is the study about?**

The study seeks to explore the experience of LGB service members and their partners during the deployment process.

**What will the study involve?**

You and your partner will be asked to complete a joint interview reflecting on your past experiences of the deployment process as a couple. You will receive a \$25 gift certificate in exchange for sharing your experiences!

**How do I know if I'm eligible to participate?**

Contact me at [757-537-4567](tel:757-537-4567) or at [aefraser@vt.edu](mailto:aefraser@vt.edu) and I will ask you and your partner some questions to see if you qualify. Qualifying couples will be those in which at least one partner deployed within the last ten years while in a relationship with his/her current partner.

## **Appendix B**

### **Telephone Screening Script**

Respondents contacted Ansley Fraser, co-Investigator, about their interest in the study. Each partner in the couple was provided the following information:

We are interested in studying the experiences of same-sex military couples during the deployment process. I will ask you and your partner some questions about your relationship history, military involvement and deployment experience. The responses you provide me will be confidential and will never be linked to your name or disclosed to anyone. The only time I would have to break confidentiality is if you told me that you wanted to harm yourself. If that were to happen, I would try to protect you by notifying the local authorities and would provide you with a treatment referral. Otherwise, your information will remain confidential. If you qualify for the study, you would then be asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire and a joint interview with myself. This meeting will last approximately 90 minutes and will be conducted in person, over-the phone, or via online video chat. There are minimal risks involved in participating in this study. Potential risks of participating include some psychological distress or discomfort when responding to interview questions of a sensitive nature, or while reflecting on a difficult experience. The benefits to you include an opportunity to share your story and collectively reflect on your experience as a couple, which may be an empowering and enlightening experience. Also, your participation would help us learn more about the experiences of sexual minorities in the military, so as to better serve them. While we hope that you'll be able to participate in study throughout its duration, you will not be penalized if you withdraw. Do you have any questions about the requirements of participating in the study? Would you still like to participate in the first step of the study, which involves answering the questions to determine your eligibility? If so, let's begin with the questions.

Each partner was asked the following questions separately:

1. Are you above 18 years of age?
2. Are you currently in a committed, same-sex relationship?
3. Have you and your partner been committed or cohabitated for at least one year?
4. Do you or your partner have present or past military experience?
5. Have you or your partner deployed during Operation Iraqi Freedom and/or Operation Enduring Freedom?
6. Were you and your partner in a committed relationship at the time of the deployment? For the entirety of the deployment process?

If deemed ineligible, respondents were thanked for their time and willingness to participate. If the screened couple was deemed eligible to participate, they set an appointment for a mutually agreed upon time and location. Participants were sent a copy of the informed consent to review prior to the interview appointment.

**Appendix C  
Information Sheet**

**VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY  
Information Sheet for Participants  
in Research Projects Involving Human Subjects**

**Title of Project:** Same Sex Military Couples' Experience of Deployment

**Principle Investigator:** Andrea Wittenborn, Ph.D.

**Co-Investigator:** Ansley Fraser, B.S.

**I. Purpose of Research**

Research investigating how same-sex military couples conjointly experience the deployment process is absent. The present study aims to contribute to the presently insufficient literature by exploring how LGB service members and their partners conjointly experience the deployment process. We are interested in learning about how same-sex couples specifically navigate the deployment process, and how they make meaning of this experience.

**II. Procedures**

You will be asked to complete a brief demographic questionnaire before your interview appointment. You will not put your name on this questionnaire in order to maintain confidentiality. You will also participate in a joint interview with your partner and the co-investigator. This interview will be conducted in person, over the phone, or via online video chat. The interview will last approximately 60-90 minutes and will be audio-recorded. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you wish to discontinue your participation in this study at any time, you may do so without facing any adverse consequences.

**III. Risks**

Risks of participating in this study are minimal. As a result of the interview process, there are potential psychological results. For example, some emotional distress and/or discomfort may occur for you and your partner when responding to interview questions of a sensitive nature, or while being asked to reflect on potentially difficult experiences.

**IV. Benefits**

Participation in this study may help you and your partner feel more connected and may allow for a collective processing of the deployment experience. In addition, the results of this study will contribute to our knowledge of the experiences of same-sex military couples during the deployment process and may help other couples in the future.

**V. Extent of Anonymity and Confidentiality**

Strict confidentiality of information will be preserved. This means that we won't tell anyone what you say in the questionnaires. No individuals apart from the research team will have access to your questionnaire, including your partner/spouse. You will be assigned an identification number that will be kept separate from any identifying information, and your questionnaires will contain

only this identification number. Names will not be used on any reports or publications that are developed from the results of this study. At no time will the researchers release the results of the study to anyone other than individuals on the research team without your written consent. The only time we would break this confidentiality is if you reported a desire to harm yourself. If you are experiencing thoughts of attempting suicide, we will notify the local police to protect your safety and would help you receive treatment. It is possible that the Institutional Review Board (IRB) may view this study's collected data for auditing purposes. The IRB is responsible for the oversight of the protection of human subjects involved in research. The audio-recordings will be destroyed when all interview appointments have been completed and after all audio-recordings have been transcribed and checked for errors.

**VI. Compensation**

You will receive a \$25 VISA gift card for your participation.

**VII. Freedom to Withdraw**

You do not have to participate in this research study. If you agree to participate, you can withdraw your participation at any time without penalty.

**VIII. Participant's Responsibilities**

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I have the following responsibilities:

1. I will complete a brief demographic questionnaire prior to the interview appointment
2. I will meet with the co-investigator for a joint interview with my partner at a mutually agreed upon time and location.

**IX. Participant's Permission**

I hereby acknowledge that the participant has read the Information Sheet and the conditions of this project and has received answers to all questions. I hereby acknowledge the participant has provided their explicit verbal consent for participation.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher's Name (please print)

If you have any questions about this research study or its conduct, and research subjects' rights, and whom to contact in the event of a research-related injury to the subject, I may contact:

Andrea Wittenborn, Ph.D  
Principal Investigator  
Ansley Fraser, B.S.  
Co-Investigator  
David M. Moore  
Chair, Virginia Tech Institutional Review  
Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

703-538-3787/andreawittenborn@vt.edu  
Telephone/e-mail  
757-537-4567/ae Fraser@vt.edu  
Telephone/e-mail  
540-231-4991/moored@vt.edu  
Telephone/e-mail

**Appendix D  
Demographic Questionnaire**

\_\_\_\_\_ Couple Number

**DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTIONNAIRE**

Date completed: \_\_\_\_\_

Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

**Relationship/Family History**

Marital status: \_\_\_\_\_

Length of relationship: \_\_\_\_\_

Do you have children?      yes                      no

If so, how many? \_\_\_\_\_

Please list gender and ages of children:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Military History/Status**

How many years have you served in the US military? \_\_\_\_\_

Please circle:

Active Duty

Reservist

Retired

What branch of the military do you/did you serve in? \_\_\_\_\_

What is/was your rank: \_\_\_\_\_

MOS/Occupation: \_\_\_\_\_

Did you serve under DADT?            yes            no

**Deployment Experience** (answer all that apply)

Have you ever been deployed?            yes            no

If so, to where and when? \_\_\_\_\_

What was the length of time of each your deployment(s)? (months) \_\_\_\_\_

How many deployments have you experienced? \_\_\_\_\_

How many deployments have you experienced as a couple? \_\_\_\_\_

What was the total length of time you were separated from your partner/spouse while deployed?  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Employment History** (answer all that apply)

Are you currently employed:            yes            no

If so, what is your position? \_\_\_\_\_

Please circle:            Part-time            Full-time

**LGBTQ Activism/Advocacy**

Are you a member of any LGBTQ right's groups?            yes            no

If so, please list organizations/groups below:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**THANK YOU FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION!**

## **Appendix E**

### **Interview Protocol**

20. Can you start by telling me a little about yourselves? Where are you from? How did you choose to serve in the military, and long have you served?
21. Could you give me a brief history of your relationship?
  - a. How did you meet and how long have you been together?
  - b. When did you all get together in the cycle of your military career?
22. Tell me about your experience of the deployment process. [If there have been multiple deployments, feel free to respond in general and make distinctions when you would like to]
  - a. How many total for service member? How many for the couple? Lengths of times? Locations?

#### Pre-deployment

23. What were both of your feelings upon receiving orders for deployment?
24. How did you emotionally prepare for deployment?
  - a. How was this helpful to you?
  - b. What do you wish you had done differently?
25. What was the emotional impact on your relationship?
26. What were your feelings as you prepared for deployment?
  - a. Emotional, physical, spiritual?
27. In preparing to separate from your partner for deployment, what did you find most helpful? Looking back, what would you have done differently?
28. What were your main stressors at that time in the relationship?
  - a. How did you cope?

## During Deployment

29. What were your feelings about reaching out to your spouse for support while overseas?
30. How were you able to connect to one another during deployment? Were there any things you did to stay close?
31. What were your feelings regarding seeking alternative means of support/outside resources (family, friends, military and civilian support groups)?
  - a. Were there any resources you feel you missed out on due to your sexual minority status?
32. Some LGB service members say that they were comfortable coming out to unit members and were able to receive support, while others say that they had to be more guarded with their sexual orientation and felt more isolated from unit support.
  - a. Were you able to seek support from your unit?
  - b. Were you able to find support through the military community at large?
33. Some couples say that deployment brings them closer together or makes them stronger, while other couples say it drives them apart. How do you feel the deployment impacted your relationship with your partner?
34. How were you able to adapt to the stress of deployment as a couple?

## Post-deployment

35. What was it like when you or your partner returned?
36. How do you feel your experience of deployment as a same-sex couple is different than straight couples?
  - a. Unique challenges?
  - b. Unique advantages?

37. What changes in your relationship, if any, do you associate with the experience?

38. Have you shared all that is significant with regard to your experience? Have I missed anything?

## Appendix F IRB Approval Letter



**Office of Research Compliance**  
Institutional Review Board  
North End Center, Suite 4120, Virginia Tech  
300 Turner Street NW  
Blacksburg, Virginia 24061  
540/231-4606 Fax 540/231-0959  
email [irb@vt.edu](mailto:irb@vt.edu)  
website <http://www.irb.vt.edu>

### MEMORANDUM

**DATE:** July 24, 2013  
**TO:** Andrea K Wittenborn, Ansley Fraser  
**FROM:** Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (FWA00000572, expires April 25, 2018)  
**PROTOCOL TITLE:** LGB Military Couples Experience of Deployment  
**IRB NUMBER:** 13-578

Effective July 24, 2013, the Virginia Tech Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chair, David M Moore, approved the New Application request for the above-mentioned research protocol.

This approval provides permission to begin the human subject activities outlined in the IRB-approved protocol and supporting documents.

Plans to deviate from the approved protocol and/or supporting documents must be submitted to the IRB as an amendment request and approved by the IRB prior to the implementation of any changes, regardless of how minor, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to the subjects. Report within 5 business days to the IRB any injuries or other unanticipated or adverse events involving risks or harms to human research subjects or others.

All investigators (listed above) are required to comply with the researcher requirements outlined at:

<http://www.irb.vt.edu/pages/responsibilities.htm>

(Please review responsibilities before the commencement of your research.)

### PROTOCOL INFORMATION:

Approved As: **Expedited, under 45 CFR 46.110 category(ies) 6,7**  
Protocol Approval Date: **July 24, 2013**  
Protocol Expiration Date: **July 23, 2014**  
Continuing Review Due Date\*: **July 9, 2014**

\*Date a Continuing Review application is due to the IRB office if human subject activities covered under this protocol, including data analysis, are to continue beyond the Protocol Expiration Date.

### FEDERALLY FUNDED RESEARCH REQUIREMENTS:

Per federal regulations, 45 CFR 46.103(f), the IRB is required to compare all federally funded grant proposals/work statements to the IRB protocol(s) which cover the human research activities included in the proposal / work statement before funds are released. Note that this requirement does not apply to Exempt and Interim IRB protocols, or grants for which VT is not the primary awardee.

The table on the following page indicates whether grant proposals are related to this IRB protocol, and which of the listed proposals, if any, have been compared to this IRB protocol, if required.

*Invent the Future*

VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE AND STATE UNIVERSITY  
*An equal opportunity, affirmative action institution*