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Presence of Openly Gay Soldiers in IDF Does Not Undermine Unit Social Cohesion

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Highlights: This study examines the correlation between presence of gay and lesbian soldiers in the Israeli Defense Force (IDF) and measures of unit social cohesion, following a survey of 417 combat and non-combat male soldiers conducted in 2000, seven years after IDF restrictions on gay personnel were terminated.¹ The argument that openly gay soldiers could undermine unit cohesion rests on a particular understanding of cohesion as a social factor based on interpersonal emotions between unit members. It argues that once unit members acknowledge the presence of a homosexual soldier among them their sense of closeness and affection for each other would drop. Under “Don’t Ask don’t Tell” (DADT) such lowered social cohesion is considered an “unacceptable risk,” irrespective of its possible impact on combat effectiveness. The study tests this social dimension of the cohesion rationale by applying a measure of social cohesion based on interpersonal emotions toward unit members. As an army constantly in the thick of combat, the IDF provides an operative test case for the effect of openly gay service on social cohesion. We examined whether knowledge of gay and lesbian soldiers in combat and non combat positions correlates with reduced measures of social cohesion. The study found that:

(1) 18% of respondents reported knowing at least one gay or lesbian soldier in their unit. No significant differences were found in knowledge of homosexual peers between soldiers in combat and non-combat positions.

(2) Social cohesion was significantly higher among combat soldiers than non combat soldiers but knowledge of homosexual peers was not related to lower measures of social cohesion. Thus, the study found no support to the hypothesis that knowledge of homosexual peers undermines unit social cohesion.

(3) Comparison with parallel U.S. military surveys reveals that even under DADT a similar percentage of service members reported knowing a gay or lesbian soldier. This suggests that the decision of gay soldiers to disclose their identity has more to do with personal and social circumstances in their unit than with official military policies.

Taken together, the findings indicate that acknowledging the presence of gay peers has no bearing on unit social cohesion, irrespective of the kind of military policy in place. We discuss the implications of these findings for the reassessment of DADT.

INTRODUCTION

The key rationale underlying the current U.S. military policy of “don’t ask, don’t tell” (DADT) is that allowing gay soldiers to openly serve in their units can disrupt unit cohesion and in turn affect readiness and combat effectiveness (U.S. Code, 1993).² The underlying assumptions implied in this rationale are twofold: (a) if soldiers discover that a particular member of their unit is homosexual this could negatively affect their ability to experience positive emotions of closeness and affection toward fellow members of their unit as a whole; (b) such reduction in emotions of closeness among unit members will impair the unit’s operational capabilities and combat readiness. The aim of this study is to provide an evidence-based assessment of the first assumption of the cohesion rationale, based on data derived from a sample of combat and non-combat soldiers in active duty in the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). We test whether knowledge of gay peers among service members effect their sense of unit social cohesion.

The greatest opposition to the recruitment of gays to the military was voiced by military personnel and leadership and lies in the presumed threat that the presence of homosexual soldiers pose to discipline, morale, unit cohesion and combat effectiveness (Herek, 1993; Moskos, 1994; Miller, 1994). The opposition to integration has declined steadily among U.S. troops over the last two decades, particularly among junior enlisted personnel (Bicknell, 2000; Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2004; Moradi and Miller, 2010). However, the unit cohesion rationale remains the most popular argument that military personnel raise in support of DADT (Moradi and Miller, 2010).

Concerns for unit cohesion were also dominant in other countries where the question of integrating sexual minorities was raised (e.g., Heinecken, 1998; Fleckenstein, 1993). A noteworthy example is the Dutch case, where official military policy supported integration since 1974. Despite this, scholars found that military personnel, particularly men, raised concern over personal face-to-face interactions with gay peers in their unit (Anderson-Boers and Van Der Meulen, 1994). Likewise, an internal survey of service members in the British military concluded that presence of homosexuals would inhibit smooth social interactions and thus would undermine morale and fighting power (HPAT, 1996).

Despite the growing debate on the impact of gay personnel on cohesion and effectiveness most of the scholarly literature on the subject has been discursive and polemical in nature and lacks a systematic social research basis (Harries-Jenkins and Dandeker, 1994, p. 202; Kier, 1998; Palm Center 2010). In what follows we review studies of cohesion in the military that inform the debate and delineate essential factors that can be translated into an empirical test.

Unit Cohesion

Opponents of lifting the gay ban bring up the issue of combat effectiveness by connecting it with the question of unit cohesion. Since the classic study of Shils and Janowitz (1948) on the fighting spirit of the German Wehrmacht in World War II scholarly attention shifted to small-unit cohesion as a key determinant of military readiness and effectiveness. In particular, cohesion was perceived to be facilitated by intimate interpersonal relationships between fellow soldiers. Along these lines scholars studied concepts such as primary groups, friendship, interpersonal attraction and buddy relations in order to explain and assess soldiers' willingness to belong to the group and to contribute to its success (Cooley, 1962; Little, 1962; Hogg, 1992). More recently, a study by Wong et al. (2003) who interviewed 40 U.S. combat soldiers while on active duty in Iraq reiterated this stand. They showed that soldiers still considered cohesion, understood as strong emotional bonds between soldiers, as an important factor in their combat motivation. However, no empirical evidence was provided to connect combat motivation with combat effectiveness and performance.

Over the years studies of cohesion in various organizations including the military have offered alternative approaches to measure cohesion and its consequences, shifting the focus from the notion of cohesiveness-as-attraction to notions associated more closely with actual performance such as shared goals, teamwork, and coordination (Carron, 1982) and developing measures that take into consideration the organizational setting and context (Siebold, 1999). Following a review of the literature MacCoun (1996, p. 159) provides an effective distinction between two aspects of cohesion, "social cohesion" and "task cohesion." Social cohesion in the group is "the extent that its members like each other, prefer to spend their social time together, enjoy each other company, and feel emotionally close to one another." In contrast task cohesion is defined as "shared commitment among members to achieving a goal that requires the collective efforts of the group" and their motivation "to coordinate their efforts as a team to achieve that goal" (MacCoun 1996, p. 159). Similar distinctions between affective or interpersonal versus instrumental aspects of cohesion emerged in various studies of organizational and military psychology (e.g. Carron, 1982; Griffith, 1988; Zaccaro and McCoy, 1988; Mullen and Copper, 1994).

Following a meta analysis of 49 experimental and correlational studies Mullen and Copper (1994) found that when examining each type of cohesion independently only factors associated with commitment to task correlated with performance whereas the interpersonal factors associated with social cohesion do not. Based on these findings some scholars have concluded that negative attitudes towards unit members do not directly bear on actual behavior and that teamwork and task cohesion

are more important than interpersonal relationships for combat effectiveness (MacCoun, 1996; MacCoun, Kier and Belkin 2006).

Yet it is still taken for granted that gay presence could affect the interpersonal aspects of social cohesion (MacCoun, 1996). Indeed, whether or not scholars reach an agreement that only task cohesion is likely to impact combat effectiveness it is still important to study social cohesion in order to address the concerns underlying DADT. The policy states that presence of gays in the military “would create an unacceptable risk to the high standards of morale, good order and discipline, and unit cohesion...”, which is defined as “the bonds of trust among individual service members” (U.S. Code, 1993). Thus, irrespective of its impact on effectiveness lowered social cohesion is considered an “unacceptable risk” and the question remains: does knowledge of gay soldiers among unit members affect the interpersonal aspects of social cohesion?

Interestingly, despite the growing interest in the cohesion rationale very few studies examined it empirically in a systematic manner. A comprehensive report on the service of gay soldiers across 5 countries with nondiscriminatory policies concludes that openly gay soldiers do not disrupt military cohesion and effectiveness (Frank, 2010). In the Israeli case the report reviews a series of observations gathered from generals, ministry officials, military scholars, NGO observers and past research reports which all conclude that presence of gay service members has not eroded cohesion, morale, or military readiness. However, these findings are based on qualitative analysis and do not provide a systematic study of the unit cohesion rationale based on quantitative sampling of military personnel. At the same time, most surveys that did sample military personnel merely asked respondents for their own opinion on the effect of openly gay personnel on cohesion or readiness (e.g., HPAT, 1996; Miller, 1994; Bicknell, 2000) rather than empirically test the actual correlation between knowledge of gay peers and unit cohesion (Palm Center, 2010).

Moradi and Miller (2010) conducted the first study to-date to provide a quantitative-statistical analysis of the impact of openly gay personnel on military readiness. Based on a poll by Zogby International of 545 U.S. service members who served in Iraq or Afghanistan (Zogby et al., 2006) they found no correlation between knowledge of gay peers among the respondents and their self reports on unit cohesion and military readiness. As they convincingly show, knowledge of gay personnel doesn't account for neither lowered measures of perceived cohesion nor of readiness. However, their single question on cohesion addressed teamwork and cooperation. Thus it effectively measured task cohesion rather than social cohesion.

Since the rationale of DADT predicts that social cohesion is likely to be influenced by presence of gay personnel, these interpersonal aspects of cohesion are left unaccounted for in current studies and are yet to be examined. Accordingly, we redefine the question of unit cohesion as the “social cohesion rationale” and put it to the test by examining the correlations between knowledge of gay soldiers in unit and a measure of social cohesion based on interpersonal emotions toward unit members.

Gays in the Israeli Military: Between Policy and Cultural Practices

The IDF is the only military to-date with a policy of universal, mandatory conscription for both men and women, although in practice it systematically maintains a gendered regime (Izraeli, 1997).³ Whereas most societies form a sharp distinction between military and civilian structures (Moskos, 1994) in Israel the military is both a central institution and a dominant cultural force (Horowitz, 1982; Kimmerling, 1993). Particularly for men, military service is often considered a prerequisite for entering adult life and an initiation rite to Zionist culture (Kaplan, 2000). Although this has changed somewhat among upper class circles it is still true for disadvantaged groups for whom military service holds an opportunity for career advancement and social mobility (Levy, 2007).

The IDF permits gays to serve openly in its ranks, similar to all NATO countries except for the U.S., Greece and Turkey. Conscripts are not particularly questioned about sexual orientation unless the topic is brought up during initial screening. Individuals who are openly gay are not exempted from service. There are no official statistics as to the percentage of gays that enlist. One non-random sample of gay men found that 84 percent completed their full term of military service (Mintzer, 1997, 58).

This has not always been the case. Gays have served in the IDF since the founding of the state of Israel in 1948. In 1983 a new regulation was introduced on the grounds that gays may constitute a security risk. Unit commanders were ordered to refer any known gay soldiers to a mental health examination accompanied by a security-risk investigation, in order to establish whether the soldier may pose a security risk and assess his or her mental strength and ability to withstand “pressures.” (IDF Manpower Division, 1986). Unofficially, homosexual tendencies were also part of the standard screening procedures carried out prior to service in order to assess the prospective adjustment of new recruits to field units. Combat duty received special emphasis in that identified gay soldiers were barred not only from secret intelligence units but also from elite combat units that hold selective screenings. The underlying logic was to exclude gay soldiers from highly consolidated units

performing under extreme stress and in conditions of closed and secluded living accommodations (Gal, 1994).

In 1993 Israeli gay activists launched a campaign for changing military regulations, aided by the dramatic public disclosure of Uzi Even – a prominent scientist who was discharged from his top-secret security position for being gay. A new policy was formulated stating that no discrimination and no restrictions should be made on the recruitment, assignment and promotion of gays in the IDF. However, commanders were still instructed to refer known gays to security clearance, this time without involvement of mental health officials, and with an option that their position would not be altered (IDF, Manpower Division, 1993). Further discussion of the change in the official policy in 1993 can be found in Walzer (2000) and Gross (2000).

There is often a disparity between military policies pertaining to gender and sexual orientation and the complexities of military practices and cultural norms within military units. Comparative studies in countries with non-exclusionary policies found that actual integration lagged behind policy changes and that gay soldiers were reluctant to openly admit their sexual orientation even though the ban was lifted (Segal, Gade, and Johnson, 1993; GAO, 1993, p. 9). A survey within the Dutch army demonstrates how very few gay soldiers declare their sexual orientation, despite the active policy of gay tolerance promoted by the Dutch military (Anderson-Boers and Van Der Meulen, 1994).

Various studies suggest that in Israel the new policy was only loosely coupled with military practices and norms. Kaplan's (2003) study of gay veterans who served under both policies found that the new ruling, which received little public attention in the military media, had little bearing on soldier's personal experiences. Some still believed that revealing one's gay orientation by their own initiative may lead to discrimination and negative reactions or even to a psychological reevaluation and dismissal from certain positions. In fact, some even considered using their gay identity as means to be reassigned from combat service, although officially this was no longer an option. More than a decade after the change in policy a survey conducted by Shilo et al. (2006) found that only 29% of gay soldiers knew for certain that the IDF allows gays to serve freely.

Eventually, the message that comes across from IDF authorities is that they simply don't deal with sexual orientation. In a private letter to human rights jurist and researcher Aeyal Gross, IDF spokesman announced that since 1998 the previous 1993 official orders pertaining to gays in the military have been abolished (Gross, 2000, p. 163). This policy of non-policy has its drawbacks. At the organizational level the military does not provide any designated legal, mental or social resources to assist gay soldiers. At best, it allows LGBT outreach organizations to meet with military

professionals and drill instructors and offer lectures on gay concerns (Cooper and Kaplan, 2010). However, there are also some advantages to this position. Some minority groups who enlist to the IDF, such as women, new immigrants and selected Arab minorities receive treatment as a special group and are often channeled to particular positions (Lomskey-Feder and Ben Ari, 1999). If gay men and lesbian women were to be likewise marked as a special group they could be subject to further prejudice among the ranks.

Combat Culture

In most contemporary industrialized societies the military is a central cultural site for the construction of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987). Within the military organization, it is above all combat roles which are considered a male preserve. Men alone participate in battle and the ultimate test of manhood is the test of battle (Kellet, 1982, pp. 301-302). Accordingly, the combat role is the core archetype of the military organization: it claims the highest status and defines the meaning of military service on a personal, organizational and public level (Devilbiss, 1994). Since in Israel active duty of three years is an obligatory and self-evident stage for most Jewish-Israeli male youth, it is the much smaller group of soldiers in combat units that risk their life on a daily basis which become associated with the values of hegemonic masculinity. In combat training values of soldiering are conflated with hegemonic male values such as risk-taking, aggressiveness, technical ability, emotional self-control, and heterosexuality (Kaplan, 2003).

In addition, combat service places strong emphasis on small unit cohesion, promoting mutual affection between unit members. This is especially evident in the Israeli case. The IDF stresses interpersonal responsibility and mutual support among unit members as part of its tactical doctrine (Kellet, 1982) and accomplishes this goal by assigning soldiers to “organic” units throughout their term of service (Ben-Ari, 1998, p. 29). Henderson (1985, p. 38) notes that for Israeli soldiers the unit is “a primary social affiliation and promotes a very strong sense of mutual affection and attraction among unit members.”

Thus, on the one hand, the endorsement of strong bonds between men in combat units encourages intimate feelings that might otherwise be avoided between men. On the other hand, combat roles subscribe to hegemonic masculinity, which disagrees with emotional expressivity between men and particularly with homosexuality. It is therefore interesting to examine whether soldiers in combat positions differ from those in non-combat positions both in their experience of social cohesion and in their acknowledgment of gay soldiers.

Research questions

1. What is the percentage of service members who know of a gay peer in their unit? Does it vary among combat and non-combat units?
2. What is the effect of combat service and knowledge of gay peer in unit on social cohesion among unit members?
3. How does knowledge of gay soldiers differ in the IDF with its non-discriminatory policy compared with the U.S. military under DADT.

METHOD

Research Rationale

This study follows the research rationale provided by Moradi and Miller (2010) who are the first to have statistically examined correlations between knowledge of gay peers and perceived unit cohesion in a sample of military personnel, rather than merely probe service members' attitudes on gay integration and its impact on cohesion. At the same time, our methodological rationale avoids some of the drawbacks in other surveys and provides a more controlled and stringent condition to test the social cohesion rationale:

a) In order to test for social cohesion directly, we focus exclusively on questions pertaining to social cohesion measured by a set of interpersonal emotions (see questionnaire design below) rather than on measures of task cohesion as in the study of Moradi and Miller (2010).

b) To avoid biases of self-selection and social desirability our questionnaire did not focus on gay issues. As most questionnaires on gays in the military present from the outset a series of explicit questions on the topic, they could potentially deter respondents who oppose to gay rights and lead to a biased sample. In addition, extensive questioning on the topic could create a bias of social desirability in the final results. Depending on the dominant views in the surrounding culture, respondents may either be reluctant to present views in favor of gay rights or, on the contrary, reluctant to admit their opposition to gay rights. In order to avoid both kinds of biases the present questionnaire poses only one concrete question on presence of gay peers. All other questions deal with general social and emotional aspects of military service.

c) We sampled only male soldiers. Although technically DADT makes no distinction between male and female soldiers the social cohesion rationale focuses on the relationship between men in combat settings. In addition, other surveys have found that female soldiers are less likely to oppose to gay integration than male soldiers (Bicknell, 2000; Moradi and Miller, 2010). Narrowing the

sample to men only and distinguished between combat and non-combat positions provides a more stringent test of the social cohesion rationale.

Procedure and Sample

During 4 months in 2000, the first author and 5 research assistants distributed questionnaires to male soldiers on active duty at the entrance to 22 military installations. Military units were chosen to include the different branches of the IDF and to cover a roughly equal number of combat and non-combat positions. Respondents were guaranteed complete anonymity, and no compensation was offered. Responses from 417 soldiers were collected in this fashion, 202 from combat soldiers and 211 from non-combat soldiers (4 missing values). Roughly 95% of respondents were in regular conscript service, aged 18-22. 93.5% graduated from high-school. 66% identifies as secular and 34% identified as religious or traditional.

Questionnaire Design

The questionnaire was presented as a study of “social attitudes and emotions in military units.” Social cohesion was measured in terms of close interpersonal bonds. This measure was developed as part of a larger study on male friendship and combat fraternity. It consists of 13 items derived from interviews with Israeli heterosexual veterans in combat and non-combat units (Kaplan, 2006) and from general studies of interpersonal relations and intimacy in Israeli and American context (Sharabani, 1994; Josselson, 1992). Respondent is asked “To what extent do you feel the following feelings toward the fellow members of your unit?” Items included: enjoying doing things together; longing to be with group; admiration; intimacy; envy; chemistry and shared language; competitiveness; love; wish to disclose personal issues; wish for validation; warmth and physical closeness; brotherhood; sense of social belonging. Responses were solicited on a 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much) scale.

Additional sections probed: (a) personal background, (b) military background, and (c) questions on social identification. This section included a question on knowledge of a gay soldier in unit, structured in the following way: “Do you know, or have known in the past, of a homosexual or lesbian soldier in your unit”? Responses included: “yes”, “no”, “maybe”. The question was adopted from a questionnaire on attitudes toward homosexuals in the military conducted at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School (Bicknell, 2000).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1) Knowledge of Gay Peers

Categories of knowledge of gay peers (‘yes’ / ‘maybe’ / ‘no’) were cross-tabulated with combat position (‘combat’ / ‘non-combat’). Results are presented in Table 1. Two findings emerge. First, percentage of IDF personnel who reported knowing a gay soldier was 18%. This indicates how little gay soldiers come out to their peers, bearing in mind that even when only one soldier discloses his or her sexual orientation this knowledge is likely to spread throughout the unit. For instance, in the U.S. Zogby poll over half (55%) of those knowing for certain about a gay or lesbian peer stated that this individual was well known by others (Zogby et al., 2006). Thus, knowledge of gay peers is not a direct measure of how many gay soldiers actively chose to disclose their identity. A survey among 329 self-identified gay soldiers in the IDF provides direct estimates for such self-disclosure (Shilo et al., 2006). It found that whereas 83% of respondents came out to their friends at home, mostly prior to their enlistment, only 35% came out to soldiers in their military unit. As respondents were recruited through networks of the gay community disclosure rates in the military among the general population of gay soldiers is likely to be lower.

Second, we conducted a chi square analysis to examine associations between knowledge of gay peers and combat position, yielding a non-significant association in knowledge of gay peers between combat and non-combat units, $\chi^2(2)=1.94$, ns. As noted above, although this indicates lack of variation in knowledge of gays among personnel in combat and non-combat positions, when examining active disclosure by gay soldiers those in combat units report systematically lower rates of disclosure than non-combat gay soldiers (Shilo et al., 2006). This coincides with the stronger pressures to meet hegemonic norms of masculinity in combat culture (Kaplan, 2003).

Table 1 - Knowledge of Gay Peers in Unit, Combat and Non-Combat Positions

	knowledge of gay peers in unit			total
	yes	maybe	no	
combat soldiers	41	53	106	200
non-combat soldiers	33	51	122	206
total	74 18%	104 26%	228 56%	406 100%

Chi square analysis between combat position and knowledge of gays was not significant ($\chi^2(2)=1.94$, ns).

2) Effects of Combat Position and Knowledge of Gay Peers on Unit Social Cohesion

In the main analysis, we conducted a two-way MANOVA to probe effects of serving in combat versus non-combat position and effect of knowledge versus no knowledge of gay peers on emotions of social cohesion. A MANOVA analysis was used because the inventory of social cohesion emotions includes discrete, yet theoretically bound items. Also, and for interpretational clarity, the category of ‘possible’ knowledge of a gay peer was dropped from these analyses.

This MANOVA yielded a significant main effect for combat service, $F(13,269) = 2.84, p < 0.01$. The knowledge of gay peers factor was not significant, $F(13,269) = 1.42, n.s.$, as was the interaction between the two factors, $F(13,269) = 1.23, n.s.$ Results are presented in Table 2. Three findings emerge:

a) Soldiers in combat positions score higher on measure of social cohesion than soldiers in non-combat positions. These results coincide with the emphasis on cohesion in IDF combat units, which promote strong mutual affection between unit members (Kellet, 1982; Henderson, 1985).

b) Knowledge of a gay or lesbian peer had no effect on social cohesion. When unit members acknowledge the presence of a homosexual soldier among them this doesn’t bear on their sense of closeness and affection for the members on the unit as a whole. Consequently, there is no basis for the assumption that openly gay service members reduce social cohesion and create an “unacceptable risk” (U.S. Code, 1993).

c) There was also no differential effect of knowledge of a gay peer in combat vs. non-combat units on social cohesion.

Table 2 - Effects of Combat Position and Knowledge of Gay Peers on Unit Social Cohesion

		variable #1		
		knowledge of gay peers		
		yes	no	
variable #2 combat position	combat			significant $F(13,269) = 2.84, p < 0.01$.
	non-combat			

not significant

$F(13,269) = 1.42, n.s.$

Interaction - not significant

$F(13,269) = 1.23, n.s.$

3) Comparison with Parallel U.S. Military Surveys

There are very few surveys which have actually asked service members whether they knew gay personnel in their unit, as in the current study. Interestingly, two such studies of the U.S. military conducted under the exclusionary policy of DADT found similar results for knowledge of gay or lesbian peers as those found in the present survey of the IDF, where no restrictions are in place. In a survey of naval personnel in 1999 20% of respondents reported that they knew a gay peer (Bicknell, 2000). In a survey of service members who served in Iraq and Afghanistan 23% of respondents reported knowing a gay peer (Zogby et al., 2006) (See Table 3).

Given the variability in samples and in the phrasing of the question, these studies are not directly comparable, but the general similarity of these figures provide a preliminary indication that the extent that service members acknowledge the presence of gay peers has little to do with the official policies on gay service in the respective militaries.

Table 3 – Comparison of Knowledge of Gay Peers in Israel and the US

Survey	knowledge of gay peers in unit			sample description
	yes	maybe	no	
Israel 2000	18%	26%	56%	406 IDF combat and non-combat personnel (men only)
US Bicknell 2000	20%	22%	58%	212 naval officers
US Zogby 2006	23%	17%	61%	545 personnel who served in Iraq/Afghanistan

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Following a survey of Israeli military personnel this study is the first to provide quantitative evidence that when service members acknowledge the presence of gay peers this has no bearing on their sense of unit social cohesion, measured as feelings of closeness and affection toward unit members. Moreover, although combat soldiers report higher levels of social cohesion than non-

combat soldier, both groups are just as likely to know a gay peer. Even in combat units acknowledging the presence of gay peers does not bear on the units' social cohesion.

What are the implications of the Israeli case for the current debate on DADT in the U.S. military? First, following Levy (2007), it is important to note structural differences in the status of Israeli and American militaries within their host societies. In Israel, military service is mandatory and the prevailing political culture endorses an inclusionary recruitment policy for all citizens. In addition, the IDF enjoys high social status. Despite the weight of traditional values and religious legislation in Israeli culture, once the military adopted a liberal policy toward gay personnel this helped legitimize gay rights in the civilian sphere. Conversely, the U.S. military enjoys less social status because in the American political tradition, which is far more liberal than in Israel, military service is portrayed to begin with as violating individual freedom (Levy, 2007). In turn, the U.S. military has greater autonomy in drawing conscripts and shaping its policies according to the conservative and hegemonic masculine values that often dominate the military subculture (Enloe, 1993; Kaplan, 2003). Thus, contrary to the Israeli case, the U.S. military lagged behind the civilian sphere in implementation of gay rights.

However, despite differences in political culture, in terms of the military organization and small group dynamics there are also grounds to consider interesting similarities between the two cases. Although there are no official restrictions on gays in the IDF, percentage of service members who reported knowing a gay or lesbian peer in their unit was 18%. Interestingly, similar rates of around 20% were found in two U.S. samples conducted under DADT (Bicknell, 2000; Zogby, 2006). The conclusion here is twofold. First, despite DADT some gay soldiers in the U.S. military consistently come out to their peers and remain in service. Second, notwithstanding the difference in policies between the two militaries the actual experience of soldiers on the ground is relatively similar. In fact, despite the general message of tolerance toward gays in the IDF, which is markedly different than the threats of prosecution and discharge under DADT, in both cases soldiers are not asked about their sexual orientation and for the most part do not disclose their identity.

A similar conclusion emerges from Belkin and Levitt's (2001) study of the Israeli case in light of DADT: both in the U.S. and in Israel gay soldiers reveal their sexual orientation only when they feel safe to do so. Comparative studies of NATO militaries have likewise found that gay soldiers were still reluctant to come out despite the change in policy (Segal, Gade, and Johnson, 1993; GAO, 1993). One can predict similar, if not stronger obstacles to coming out in the U.S. military under current homophobic conditions, even if DADT is repealed (Belkin and Levitt, 2001).

Moreover, one should bear in mind that implementation of military policies is often only loosely coupled with organizational practices. Indeed, most IDF soldiers and officers do not know the guidelines for gay service members. Stories of gay soldiers who served in the IDF during the exclusionary policy or after its termination in 1993 reveal that the policy change had little bearing on their experiences (Kaplan, 2003). The military authorities kept gay enlistment a minor concern by sticking to a minimal strategy: they officially acknowledge the full participation of gays and at the same time ignore them as a group that may require special needs.

It follows that the whole presentation of the debate as a problem of accepting “openly gays” has little relevance to the realities of military life. The choice of soldiers whether or not to come out has much more to do with personal considerations, their social position in the unit and its particular cultural atmosphere than with official policy statements. A closer look at the Zogby poll (Zogby et al., 2006) conducted under DADT reveals that among those who “know for certain” of gay or lesbians in their unit, this knowledge comes not only from being “told” but also from the “behavior” of gay soldiers, such as their manner of speech, appearance, or social activities.

Finally, even among those roughly 20% soldiers who acknowledge the presence of gay peers among them, the study shows that this knowledge has no bearing on their sense of social cohesion. If this is the case in the Israeli military with its particular emphasis on organic units with strong interpersonal ties among members (Ben-Ari, 1998), there is even less reason to assume that knowledge of gay peers will hinder social cohesion in the US military, where, given the tradition of individual personnel replacement, the unit doesn’t form such a strong source of identification to begin with (Henderson, 1985, p. 31; Kier, 1998).

Despite what military officials want to ask or insist on not asking, and despite what some activists expect gay soldiers to tell, most gay and straight soldiers are not preoccupied with the formalities of disclosure. They simply find ways to function together. A policy restricting the full participation of gay soldiers has paradoxically made sexuality a more salient aspect of military life than ever before, and this in itself can be a good reason to consider a policy change.

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Notes

¹ Original survey was conducted by Danny Kaplan and Aaron Belkin, Palm Center.

² We hereafter use the generic term gay to refer to both male and female homosexuals in the military, except when quoting survey items that specifically address gay men and lesbian women. It should be noted that the cohesion rationale focuses primarily on the presumed tensions between gay and straight men

³ Despite an official policy of universal conscription in practice some major religious and ethnic groups are effectively exempted from service, each under a different arrangement. This includes Jewish Orthodox women, Jewish Ultra-Orthodox men and women, and Israeli Palestinian men and women. The women who do serve enlist for a year and nine months, whereas men are conscripted for three years. Men are called for annual reserve duty throughout much of their adult lives, whereas women are mostly exempted from reserve duty. Although women are gradually allowed into combat units they are still channeled to designated units and positions (Sasson-Levy, 2001).