Camouflage Romance: Same-Gender Romantic Relationship Quality and Effects on Military Commitment

Karen Tannenbaum
Claremont Graduate University

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarship.claremont.edu/cgu_etd

Part of the Social Psychology Commons

Recommended Citation

This Open Access Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the CGU Student Scholarship at Scholarship @ Claremont. It has been accepted for inclusion in CGU Theses & Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholarship @ Claremont. For more information, please contact scholarship@claremont.edu.
Camouflage Romance: Same-Gender Romantic Relationship Quality and Effects on Military Commitment

By
Karen Tannenbaum

Claremont Graduate University

2023
Approval of the Dissertation Committee

This dissertation has been duly read, reviewed, and critiqued by the Committee listed below, which hereby approves the manuscript of Karen Tannenbaum as fulfilling the scope and quality requirements for meriting the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Psychology.

Allen Omoto, Chair
Pitzer College
Vice President for Academic Affairs and Dean of Faculty

Jason Siegel
Claremont Graduate University
Social Psychology Program Chair and Professor of Psychology

Becky Reichard
Claremont Graduate University
Associate Professor of Psychology

Cynthia Sikorski
National Maritime Center, Medical Evaluation Division
Operations Chief and Physician
Abstract

Camouflage Romance: Same-Gender Romantic Relationship Quality and Effects on Military Commitment

By

Karen Tannenbaum

Claremont Graduate University: 2023

Military life comes with a host of challenges for romantic relationships. Romantic partners withstand the pressures of deployment and geographical relocations (i.e., military transitions) to support their service members’ careers and play a critical role in swaying service members’ decisions to remain committed to the military beyond contractual obligations. Prior work has primarily focused on experiences of heterosexual dyads, with scant literature elucidating experiences of sexual minority military personnel in same-gender romantic relationships. Informed by work-family conflict and stress spillover, this research effort used a mixed-methods sequential explanatory approach to explicate how military transition-related stress (TRS) affects romantic relationship quality, the association between romantic relationship quality and military commitment, and whether Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community connectedness influences these associations among sexual minority military personnel in same-gender romantic relationships.

Study 1 leveraged archival quantitative cross-sectional self-report survey data from a subsample of military participants (N = 73) drawn from a broader landmark research project launched in 2015 on the experiences of sexual minority military personnel. Because the study was initiated in 2015, before transgender service members were permitted to serve openly in the
military, study measures referred to the LGB community vs. the LGBT community. Study 1 tested a hypothesized moderated mediation model, where romantic relationship quality was expected to mediate the relationship between TRS and military commitment, and LGB community connectedness was hypothesized to moderate the mediation effect by buffering the effects of stress on romantic relationship quality. Correlation analyses revealed that TRS and romantic relationship quality were unrelated, and romantic relationship quality was significantly and negatively linked to military commitment. A significant moderation was found such that romantic relationship quality was higher when LGB community connectedness was higher – in that case, TRS did not affect romantic relationship quality. However, TRS was positively associated with romantic relationship quality when LGB community connectedness was lower. The mediation effect approached statistical support but was ultimately not significant. Study 1 suggested that service members may effectively compartmentalize stress due to work and their romantic relationship – finding other mechanisms to protect their romantic relationship from external stressors. Service members, especially those close to their partners, may be more easily influenced to leave the service if military life does not fit plans for the relationship or family growth. For those less connected to the LGB community, military couples may flourish when faced with stressful experiences. Although Study 1 findings showed promise for understanding same-gender romantic relationships in the military, more information was needed to elucidate emerging relationships between study variables.

Study 2 explained and extended Study 1 findings via semi-structured interviews conducted in 2023 with 14 sexual minority military personnel in same-gender romantic relationships. Participants described the mutual influence of family and military life, especially around military transitions, LGBT community connectedness, and military commitment. Using
an Interpretive Phenomenological Approach, five themes encapsulated participants’ lived experiences: Relationship Strain and Career Progression; Stress Spillover; Minority Stress; LGBT Visibility and Acceptance in the Military, and Establishing Connections; and Relationship Dynamics and Growth. Study 2 suggested that the extent to which romantic relationships influenced military commitment varied by the degree to which partner goals and perspectives were valued. Military disruptions in romantic relationships extended beyond the transition itself; service members missed milestones, transitions negatively affected partner career aspirations, and transitions induced feelings of isolation or distress among partners. Participants shared experiences unique to the LGBT community concerning both individual wellbeing (e.g., discrimination) and romantic relationship quality, and opportunities for relationship growth and connection through novel experiences offered by military life.

This research is among the first empirical investigations of same-gender romantic relationships among active-duty service members, contextualizing the link between romantic relationship quality and military commitment. Taken together, research findings indicate that community connectedness is vital for some service members and their romantic partners, and that romantic relationships are significant influences on service members' decisions to remain committed to the military, with several unique challenges faced by sexual minority service members warranting increased attention. This project showcases strengths of mixed-methods research, with theoretical implications and policy changes to best support sexual minority military personnel and their romantic relationships.

Results elicit three recommendations for military policy and resources to support sexual minority service members and their families. First, the DoD may consider updating diversity, equity, and inclusion plans to mitigate challenges sexual minority service members and their
families face while identifying best practices to work alongside local communities to remediate these challenges. Second, the DoD may consider addressing access to existing resources for sexual minority service members and their families, and especially social support resources. Finally, the DoD may consider evaluating military resources developed to prevent sexual-identity based discrimination. As one of the earliest investigations of experiences among sexual minority military personnel in same-gender relationships, this set of studies makes a critical contribution to the broader literature on military families and catalyzes future research efforts on sexual minority military families.
Acknowledgements

I am indebted to several people who provided unconditional support and encouragement throughout this process.

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my Committee Chair and Advisor, Dr. Allen Omoto, who provided professional development and academic support, and without whom this dissertation would not exist. I am so appreciative of your unwavering support. Thank you for sharing your social capital with me to help me land my dream job and thank you for providing me with the opportunity to help coordinate the PATH study. To my Committee Member, Dr. Jason Siegel, thank you for encouraging me to apply for funding and for helping to set up another successful research collaboration between Leidos/NHRC and CGU, and for providing the motivation I needed to build resilience and successfully defend my dissertation. I am grateful to my Committee Members, Dr. Becky Reichard, and Dr. Cynthia Sikorski, for providing thoughtful dissertation feedback. I would also like to recognize Dr. Cynthia Thomsen, who served as co-PI along with Dr. Allen Omoto on the PATH project.

To Dr. Deb Mashek, Dr. Cynthia Thomsen, and Dr. David Mendelsohn, words may not begin to express the gratitude I feel for your support and guidance along my PhD journey. I feel so lucky and so grateful to know you all as friends, but also as mentors and role models. Thank you for your words of wisdom along the way. I could not have reached this point without you.

I would like to thank my dear friends and colleagues Dr. Danielle Blazek, Ms. Cara Tan, and Ms. Megan Mansfield, Ms. Carissa Carrasquillo, Ms. Robyn McRoy, and my many supportive co-workers at Leidos and the Naval Health Research Center. Thank you to the amazing Ms. Linda Pillow for all your help getting me over the finish line, I am so grateful for all you do for DBOS and for CGU.
I would not have been able to complete my degree without support of my mother, Ariela Tannenbaum, my father, Zvi Tannenbaum, my sister, Shiry Tannenbaum, and my brother, Oz Tannenbaum. Thank you for encouraging me to follow my dreams.

I wish to extend my gratitude to the service members and veterans who volunteered time to participate in these studies, without whom this project would not be possible. Thank you for inspiring me and thank you for your service.

Finally, to the love of my life, Jen Kinshaw. Thank you for loving me so much, thank you for your patience with me, thank you for your unyielding enthusiasm and encouragement, and thank you for making me the luckiest woman in the world. You have made my life so much better, and I do not think words could possibly express how much you mean to me. I hope I make you feel as special as you make me feel every day. This is all for you.
# Table of Contents

Chapter I. Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1

Chapter II. Literature Review ......................................................................................................... 5
  - Work-Family Conflict ............................................................................................................... 8
  - Community Connection ......................................................................................................... 12
  - The Current Studies ............................................................................................................. 14
  - Specific Research Questions and Hypotheses .................................................................. 17

Chapter III. Study 1 ...................................................................................................................... 18
  - Method ................................................................................................................................. 18
    - Participants ...................................................................................................................... 19
    - Procedures ...................................................................................................................... 25
    - Measures ......................................................................................................................... 29
  - Preliminary Analyses .......................................................................................................... 32
  - Primary Analyses ................................................................................................................ 36
  - Discussion ............................................................................................................................ 45

Chapter IV. Study 2 ...................................................................................................................... 53
  - Method ................................................................................................................................. 53
    - Participants ...................................................................................................................... 54
    - Procedures ...................................................................................................................... 57
    - Semi-Structured Interview Content ............................................................................ 60
  - Data Processing ................................................................................................................... 62
    - Codebook Development ............................................................................................... 62
  - Results .................................................................................................................................. 65
    - Relationship Strain and Career Progression ............................................................... 66
    - Stress Spillover ................................................................................................................ 74
    - Minority Stress ............................................................................................................... 78
    - LGBT Visibility and Acceptance in the Military, and Establishing Connections ...... 82
    - Relationship Dynamics and Growth ........................................................................... 93
  - Discussion .............................................................................................................................. 96

Chapter V. Discussion .................................................................................................................... 102
  - Implications and Recommendations ................................................................................. 106
    - Recommendations ........................................................................................................ 108
  - Limitations and Future Directions ...................................................................................... 110
  - Conclusion ............................................................................................................................ 116

References ....................................................................................................................................... 118
Appendices................................................................................................................................................ 137
Appendix A. PATH Logo ..................................................................................................................... 137
Appendix B. PATH Social Media Recruitment Message ..................................................................... 138
Appendix C. PATH Recruiting Paragraph ............................................................................................ 139
Appendix D. PATH recruitment flyer ................................................................................................... 140
Appendix E. PATH Study Website ........................................................................................................ 141
Appendix F. PATH Qualtrics Email Invitation ..................................................................................... 142
Appendix G. PATH Baseline Questionnaire Survey Items used in Study 1 ......................................... 143
Appendix H. Semi-Structured Interview Guide .................................................................................... 147
Appendix I: Study 2 Codebook ............................................................................................................. 152
Appendix J: Reflexivity Statement ....................................................................................................... 153
Appendix K: Transcription Notation .................................................................................................... 155
Chapter I. Introduction

United States (U.S.) military troops have been consistently involved in international conflicts over the last 20 years, with the number of military personnel remaining in service decreasing overall since 2010 (Department of Defense Demographics Report of the Military Community, 2022). Accompanying high operational tempo, frequent overseas deployments, and ongoing stressors due to these conflicts affect both military personnel and their families. For several reasons, families are integral to service member performance, commitment to the military, and overall military readiness in the U.S. all-volunteer force. Family members, including romantic relationship partners, support military personnel in times of stress. Conversely, they may contribute to challenges or problems that interfere with service member performance or career decisions (NASEM, 2019). Moreover, family members must withstand the pressures of deployment and geographical relocations to support their service member’s career. Romantic partners also play a crucial role in swaying service members’ decisions to remain committed to military service beyond contractual obligations (Woodall et al., 2022). Thus, understanding how military romantic relationships are faring is essential to the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD). This sentiment was underscored by the 1994 Army Science Board, which stated: “Recognition of the powerful impacts of the family on readiness, retention, morale, and motivation must be instilled in every soldier from the soldier’s date of entry-to-service through each succeeding promotion” (Schneider & Martin, 1994, p.5).

In 2019, the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) was tasked by the Office of Military Community and Family Policy (MC&FP) to assemble a committee to generate a report illuminating the challenges, opportunities, and experiences of military families, as well as an overview of strategies and resources implemented by the DoD to
support them. This committee determined that greater attention must be paid to family stability and diversity given ever-changing societal standards and increasing variations in family structures and dynamics (NASEM, 2019), and especially given estimates suggesting there may be as many as 16,000 sexual and gender minority families in the military (Oswald & Sternberg, 2014). Nonetheless, the 2022 Demographics Profile of the Military Community does not include administrative personnel data reflecting the number of same-gender marriages in the military, nor do those data include statistics on nonmarital partners. Consequently, extant DoD data are insufficient in reflecting the effects of changes in societal norms on military family structures. In this way, and because military program leaders or policymakers are not aware of statistics on diversity in military families, sexual minority service members may be underserved by those resources intended to support their family functioning.

Further, prior research on military romantic relationships has generally focused on experiences of heterosexual romantic relationships, with a paucity of peer-reviewed studies devoted to understanding the challenges and opportunities faced by same-gender military couples. A recent systematic literature review conducted by Knobloch and colleagues (2023) synthesized research on relationship maintenance among military couples over two decades. Data were analyzed from 81 journal articles spanning 62 journals with samples representing over 80,000 participants in military-connected relationships. In their review, only one same-sex relationship was overtly included, making a stark gap in same-gender military romantic relationships research especially salient (Knobloch et al., 2023). Even so, prior research indicates that compared to heterosexual peers, sexual minority service members were significantly more likely to report poorer military satisfaction, lower perceived support from their military units, and were more likely to separate from service (Carey et al., 2022). Moreover, relative to
heterosexual service members, sexual minority service members were more likely to be undecided about the future of their military career (McNamara et al., 2021). Those sexual minority service members who perceived lower acceptance in the military were more likely to get out of the military (McNamara et al., 2021). This is particularly relevant now given discriminatory experiences in the military and the recent wave of state legislatures passing policies adversely affecting members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and other gender and sexual minority (hereafter referred to as LGBT) community. Drag show performances are now banned on military bases (Kheel & Novel, 2023), and military families were recently forced to move to different bases as a function of rampant anti-LGBT bullying at local schools (Decker, 2023). These policies and actions are inconsistent with the DoD’s goals of making the U.S. military a more diverse and inclusive force (Garamone, 2022), and research on the experiences of LGBT service members and their families is critical to informing these policies.

Drawing from the empirical literature on military and LGBT romantic relationships and leveraging a work-family conflict perspective, this research examines links between military-specific transition-related stressors, romantic relationship quality, LGBT sense of community, and military commitment within the structure of a comprehensive model. More precisely, the current set of studies seeks to address this research gap by using a mixed-methods sequential explanatory approach to 1) elucidate the effects of military transition-related stress on romantic relationship quality and military commitment among service members in same-gender romantic relationships, 2) examine the impact of romantic relationship quality on service members’ decisions to stay committed to the military, and 3) explore whether connectedness to the LGBT community plays a role. Ultimately, findings from this research may inform future research
efforts on experiences of same-gender military romantic relationships and may inform programs and policies to best support these military couples.
Chapter II. Literature Review

Active duty service members are expected to maintain full operational commitment at all times. They experience frequent changes in geographical location (from Permanent Change of Station [PCS] moves or trainings), unpredictable work schedules, and many must go on deployments as part of their Military Occupational Specialty. Deployments refer to activities related to moving military personnel or equipment from an installation to a specified location to support operational missions or other military action (Wenger et al., 2018). Deployments are often characterized by uncertainty concerning when a service member will leave for deployment and when they will return and are often associated with stress (Vasterling & Proctor, 2011). Negative features of deployments, including uncertainty and family separation, significantly impact stress levels and, ultimately, intent to stay in the service (Hosek & Totten, 1998; Hosek et al., 2006). Prior research has demonstrated that combat deployments can result in immediate and long-term distress (Adler et al., 1996; Britt & Bliese, 2003).

Evidence on self-reported deployments and re-enlistment decisions indicated that service members with higher numbers of deployments or more extended deployments were less likely to report intentions to stay in the military beyond contractual obligations (Ramsberger & Wetzel, 1998; Cooke et al., 1992). Over one-third of military personnel declared “too many deployments” as the primary reason for electing to leave the military (Adler & Golembe, 1998). However, deployments are not the only routine military transition affecting military personnel. Every few years (with the precise timeline depending on military occupational specialty and branch of service), service members are expected to move to different duty stations as a function of PCS moves. These duty stations may be in different cities, states, or countries, and service members will either move with their families if applicable or go on “geobachelor” status and
move to their new duty station without their families. Such transitions may be distinguished by
stretches of loneliness and isolation, and losses of social support, with the potential to interfere
with interpersonal relationships (Smith & Hagman, 2006).

Moving, joining a new command, and becoming accustomed to a new city, are
considered poignant sources of stress for military personnel and their families (Drummet et al.,
2003; Sheppard et al., 2010) with implications for service member commitment. Increases in
PCS move frequencies are associated with reduced service member intentions to stay in the
military (Burrel et al., 2006; General Accounting Office, 2001; Hengstebeck et al., 2016; U.S.
Chamber of Commerce, 2017; Tong et al., 2018). Shelley and colleagues (2011) explored factors
associated with officers’ self-reported intention to leave military service in the Army Dental
Corps before their 20-year retirement. Using data from the 2009 Army Dental Officer Retention
Survey (Office of the Surgeon General; Dental Corps Branch), findings revealed that 72% and
69% of respondents cited stressors such as PCSs and deployments, respectively, as primary
factors contributing to reduced commitment to the military (Shelley et al., 2011). Earlier
qualitative research on Marine Corps personnel found that excess time away from home was the
primary reason for leaving the military (Whitlow, 1990).

Whereas the link between transition-related stress and military commitment has been
established among military personnel in general, less is known about the experiences of sexual
minority military members, for whom these typical transition-related stressors may be
exceptionally challenging. Deployments may involve interacting with new working groups and
new leadership, which may affect LGBT service members’ perception of safety around being out
or identifiable as an LGBT person. Furthermore, PCS moves may be particularly difficult for
LGBT service members if the move involves separating from an established LGBT social
network already developed in their home duty station (Oswald & Sternberg, 2014). Moreover, duty locations may vary regarding local attitudes towards LGBT people (NASEM, 2019). As such, the decision to disclose or conceal one’s sexual identity, or general feelings of safety may be affected by the personnel and geographical location of their next duty station. In Sullivan et al.’s (2021) mixed-methods study, findings indicated that a small but critical group of LGBT service members reported that they felt it was unsafe for their family to live in their current duty location (Sullivan et al., 2021). Taken together, it is expected that the same patterns of findings reflecting the relationship between transition-related stress and military commitment among military personnel overall will hold among military personnel in same-gender romantic relationships; increases in transition-related stress are anticipated to decrease military commitment beyond contractual obligations.

Among same-gender couples, civilian partners may not have access to military spouse support, and their experiences may not be wholly understood or valued by other members of the LGBT community. Additionally, recent research indicated that over 60% of service members agreed that military resources developed to support families do not meet the needs of LGBT families (Sullivan et al., 2021). Further, some participants perceived resources offered by the military were generally less inclusive of sexual minority families compared to heterosexual families (Sullivan et al., 2021). These experiences may contribute to increased feelings of isolation based on military transitions. Deployment and geobachelor separations are overwhelming for romantic relationships (Knobloch et al., 2013; Knobloch & Theiss, 2012), and these stressors may be particularly salient for same-gender partners of military personnel. Romantic partners of military personnel similarly feel the weight of transition experiences; loneliness during deployments, financial insecurity, concern over lack of support from the
military, and concern for their service member’s safety and wellbeing are often cited as key stressors affecting romantic partners during transitions (Di Nola, 2008; Palmer, 2008; Warner et al., 2009), and inducing work-family conflict. The work-family conflict perspective is one theoretical framework that aids empirical understanding of military and family life dynamics.

**Work-Family Conflict**

Work-family conflict is a derivation of role conflict (Kahn et al., 1964), wherein pressures from one role (e.g., romantic relationship partner) obstruct another role (e.g., service member) and vice versa (Wadsworth & Owens, 2007). Using Greenhaus and Beutell’s (1985) conceptualization, work-family conflict reflects the extent to which “role pressures from the work and nonwork domains are incompatible in some respect” (p.77). Romantic partners are interdependent, such that their attitudes, behaviors, and experiences are linked with individual outcomes and the overall quality of the romantic relationship (Kelley et al., 2003; Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). Thus, stress from work may spill into a romantic relationship, and those individual stressors, in turn, affect romantic partners (Neff & Karney, 2004).

Stress spilled between work and home domains, and between romantic partners (Grzywacz et al., 2002; Neff & Karney, 2007; Totenhagen et al., 2013) negatively affects romantic relationship quality (Bodenmann et al., 2007; Fellows et al., 2016). For example, a service member’s stress experienced as a consequence of deployment, and the challenges they may undergo both during deployment and upon reintegration, likely impact their partner and, ultimately, their romantic relationship (Knobloch & Theiss, 2012). Conversely, responses by romantic partners may worsen these challenges, contributing to work-family conflict. Meta-
analytic research supported a significant negative association between work-family conflict (including spillover effects) and romantic relationship quality (Fellows et al., 2016).

Research on military romantic relationships places considerable focus on work-family conflict, given the structural and psychological demands military life places on family members and vice versa (MacDermid Wadsworth & Southwell, 2011). Strain from attempting to balance work obligations and home responsibilities is cited as one of the main stressors affecting military families (Warner et al., 2009). In her 1986 paper, titled “The Military and the Family as Greedy Institutions,” Segal contends that tensions between family and the military place a substantial burden on military personnel (Segal, 1986). These tensions breed conflict and work-family spillover (Coser, 1974; De Angelis & Segal, 2015; Segal, 1986). Military demands on service members are derived from operational requirements, but coincide with employment and financial stability with opportunities for advancement (Kleykamp, 2013). Military families are essentially tied to their service member’s careers with no control over military transitions or the timing of such transitions. In this way, military families become “tied migrants,” who move with their service members as a function of PCSs, for example, even when the move is not in the best interest of the military partner or children (Cooke, 2013; Cooke & Speirs, 2005, p.343). For example, geographical moves may have consequences for completing educational requirements or hindering romantic partners’ career advancement (Hosek et al., 2002; Kleykamp, 2013) which may negatively affect romantic relationship quality.

Recently, Ribeiro and colleagues (2022) quantitatively explored the unique impact of geographical moves on romantic relationships among heterosexual Army couples. Results showed that stress from PCSs was a stronger predictor of psychological stress for couples compared to post-traumatic stress and deployment-related stress among Army spouses, even
after controlling for number of months separated during deployments and service member PTSD symptoms (Ribeiro et al., 2022). In 2018, the RAND Corporation conducted a mixed-methods investigation of the disruptions faced by military families as a function of PCSs. Key findings indicated a causal link between PCS and military spouse stressors, including spousal unemployment and underemployment (Tong et al., 2018). The 2011 Health-Related Behaviors Survey (Barlas et al., 2013) found that discord between military life and family life, and geographical distance between social support networks were among the highest-endorsed stressors of military family life. Consistent with these findings, qualitative research conducted by RAND revealed concerns among Air Force officers about the detrimental effects of frequent geographical moves and deployments on romantic relationships, and that romantic relationship factors were critical to active duty service commitment (Keller et al., 2018).

Deployments are frequently distinguished by long bouts of time apart from loved ones, limited communication, increased stress, and chance of engagement in combat depending on deployment types. In a study of soldiers’ spouses, Hurley et al. (2012) found that more deployments experienced during a relationship were associated with lower marital adjustment. In research using data from 6,494 heterosexual couples (mostly male service members and female civilian spouses) included in the Millennium Cohort Study, Pflieger et al. (2021) found that combat experience increased the risk of marital instability for service members and their veteran partners, echoing an earlier Institute of Medicine Report (2010) revealing an association between war-zone deployments and marital conflict (IOM, 2010). In a study of 1,408 heterosexual U.S. Army couples (mostly male service members and female civilian spouses), Karney and Trail (2017) found unique independent effects of deployment and post-traumatic stress symptoms on relationships such that marital satisfaction decreased as the number of combat deployments, the
number of months deployed, combat exposure, and service member post-traumatic stress symptoms increased. First deployments were exceptionally tough on military couples, such that the association between romantic relationship satisfaction and first deployments (as well as the first few months of deployments) was particularly strong and negative relative to the association between romantic relationship satisfaction and later deployments (Karney & Trail, 2017). Thus far, research on military work-family conflict or stress spillover has focused on heterosexual dyads.

Nonetheless, research on same-gender romantic relationships similarly indicate a negative link between stress spillover and romantic relationship quality. To illustrate this, Totenhagen and colleagues (2017) evaluated concurrent and delayed effects of stress on romantic relationship quality among 81 same-gender couples. Using a daily diary approach, findings revealed negative associations between both concurrent partner and actor perceptions of romantic relationship quality (Totenhagen et al., 2017). One qualitative study on lesbian military romantic relationships in Canada provides some insight into how LGBT and military life overlap (Gouliquer & Poulin, 2005). In this study, participants recounted seeking supportive environments and the notable difficulties that coincide with seeking support in particularly isolated regions. Civilian partners expressed separating from other lesbian social networks and friends as one of the more difficult parts of following their service members to different duty stations. Some participants described being thrust into coming out (if they had not done so already) as a function of relocating with their partner. In addition, participants grappled with competing values between lesbian and military communities (e.g., independent lesbian ideals vs. ascribing to a heteronormative schema of female dependence on service member partners; Gouliquer & Poulin, 2005). In this way, challenges inherent in geographical relocations were
compounded by sexual minority-specific difficulties. Consequently, it is expected that transition-related stress will be negatively associated with romantic relationship quality for sexual minority service members.

**Community Connection**

Military transitions often coincide with changes in community contexts. Romantic partners may seek community or lean more heavily on community members when their partners are deployed, and geographical relocations inherently involve setting up new social support networks. As such, military members and their partners are often faced with adapting to local settings, which may vary with respect to acceptance of sexual minority people, or social networks for LGBT people seeking such a community. From a socioecological perspective, emphasis is placed beyond family systems to account for the effects of larger community contexts on available resources within which military families are embedded (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). For sexual minority service members, having a strong sense of LGBT community may protect against the negative effects of stress on romantic relationship quality and commitment to military service. A sense of community generally refers to feelings and beliefs of being in communion with a larger collective, in which members are mutually influential and share an emotional connection with the collective (McMillan, 1996; McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Community connectedness is different from community participation (e.g., recreational activities), in that connectedness reflects both cognitive and affective aspects of sharing mutual goals and being “one” with the collective (Ashmore et al., 2004). Moreover, a community can be construed as a “psychological entity” or conceptualization that community members share with each other, gain personal meaning from, and develop an emotional connection with (Omoto & Snyder, 2009; Sarason, 1974). Community connectedness serves various functions, such as
providing a buffer against stress and a place to develop and express identities (Bess et al., 2002). The LGBT community is theorized to operate as a key group-level coping resource for LGBT community members. Feeling support from other LGBT people protects against the negative effects of stress (Kertzner et al., 2009; Major & O’Brien, 2005; Meyer, 2003), and feeling a sense of connectedness with the LGBT community is one type of social support receiving increased attention in research (e.g., Rogers et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2021). For sexual and gender minorities, the LGBT community serves an essential function of providing “safe spaces” for them to interact without threat, socialize with one another, and access other social resources (Harper & Schneider, 2003; Woolwine, 2000).

Although military members and their families must adapt to changes in geographical location and deployments and cope with associated stress, maintaining a psychological connection with the LGBT community may buffer against the effects of stress on romantic relationships. Community connectedness has been explored in the literature on military relationships, particularly concerning the buffering effects of community connectedness against sources of stress. In an investigation of the effects of community connections on military families, O’Neal and colleagues (2018) found that military couples with more developed community connections (i.e., increased sense of community, greater community engagement) were also better able to cope with stressors. Though research on LGBT community connectedness shows some evidence for protecting romantic relationship quality, this research has not taken into account the unique nature of military experiences for same-gender romantic relationships. Nevertheless, given existent research in the civilian sector, it is expected that LGBT community connectedness will be positively associated with romantic relationship quality for military personnel in same-gender romantic relationships.
The Current Studies

The current research effort examined the link between transition-related stress, romantic relationship quality, and military commitment among active duty service members in same-gender romantic relationships, and whether LGBT community connectedness protects against the adverse effects of stress on romantic relationships. A mixed-methods sequential explanatory study was utilized to gain an improved understanding of sexual minority romantic relationships in the military. Quantitative findings establish statistical relationships between constructs, and interviews provide in-depth insight into lived experiences to help elucidate quantitative results. A mixed methods approach to research involves collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing qualitative and quantitative data to unearth a comprehensive understanding of the research question (Creswell, 2005; 2013; Ivankova et al., 2006; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Given that transition-related stress has not yet been studied with respect to romantic relationship quality for sexual minority couples or in relation to military commitment, both quantitative and qualitative research in concert is necessary to put a finger on the pulse of potential relationships support romantic relationships, and to map directions for future work.

Although the quantitative analyses will describe the sample and explicate associations among study variables, qualitative data will illuminate findings and provide additional information needed to comprehensively understand the effects of transition-related stress on romantic relationship quality and military commitment. Research on romantic relationships among sexual minority service members in the U.S. is in its infancy, warranting a research approach that involves complementary methods to gain insight into the experiences of service members in same-gender relationships and how those experiences may factor into decisions to stay in the military. The strengths of both qualitative and quantitative approaches are leveraged
here to capture a robust analysis of the experiences of sexual minority service members in same-gender romantic relationships.

Study 1 leveraged cross-sectional quantitative data drawn from a large-scale, congressionally funded research study known as the Personal Adjustment, Transitions, and Health (PATH) Study funded by the Congressionally Directed Medical Research Program; described in more detail in Chapter 2. The PATH study was funded in the years before the executive order permitting transgender service members to serve openly in the U.S. military (White House Executive Order, 2021). Therefore, the PATH study focused on issues affecting sexual minority service members only, rather than including gender diverse-specific questions, in line with policy requirements. Thus, going forward for Study 1, the term “LGB community connectedness” will be used to follow verbiage and measures used in the PATH research project. A hypothesized moderated mediation model guided this research (Figure 1), where romantic relationship quality was expected to mediate the negative relationship between transition-related stress and military commitment, and LGB community connectedness was hypothesized to moderate the mediation effect. Study 2 involved a primary interview data collection with active duty and veteran service members in same-gender romantic relationships, designed and analyzed using an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (Moustakas, 1994; Smith et al., 2009) approach.
Figure 1

Conceptual model (Hayes’ PROCESS; Model 7) illustrating hypothesized relationships between predictor and outcome variables
Specific Research Questions and Hypotheses

Although extant studies have explored the influence of stress, community connectedness, and romantic relationship functioning on military commitment, most of this work has not considered the unique experiences of same-gender romantic relationships among sexual minority service members. Both Studies 1 and 2 will examine the following research question, with Study 1 testing each associated hypothesis using quantitative data, and Study 2 expounding on constructs of interest (i.e., transition-related stress, romantic relationship quality, LGBT community connectedness, and military commitment) based on lived experiences. The guiding research question and hypotheses for this research effort are as follows:

Research Question: What is the nature of the relationships between transition-related stress, romantic relationship quality, and military commitment among sexual minority military personnel, and does LGB community connectedness play a role?

Hypothesis 1: Greater levels of transition-related stress will be associated with (a) lower romantic relationship quality and (b) lower military commitment.

Hypothesis 2: LGB community connectedness will condition the relationship between transition-related stress and romantic relationship quality, such that the negative relationship will be especially strong for those who report lower LGB community connectedness. No differences in romantic relationship quality are expected for those participants with higher LGB community connectedness.

Hypothesis 3: Romantic relationship quality will mediate the relationship between transition-related stress and military commitment (mediation); and the strength of the mediation effect will be especially strong for those service members low in LGB community connectedness (moderated mediation).
Chapter III. Study 1

Study 1 examined the hypothesized relationships between transition-related stress and romantic relationship quality and military commitment, whether romantic relationship quality mediates the relationship between transition-related stress and military commitment, and whether LGB community connectedness protects against the consequences of stress.

Method

Data for this study were drawn from a large-scale research effort known as the Personal Adjustment, Transitions, and Health (PATH) study. The Congressionally Directed Medical Research Program funded the PATH study in 2014 under the directorship of Allen Omoto, Ph.D. and Cynthia Thomsen, Ph.D. (Award No. W81XWH-15-2-0056). This landmark study was one of only two research projects selected for funding by the Congressionally Directed Medical Research Program in 2014 that explicitly focused on the experiences of sexual minority service members. The PATH study used a multiphase, mixed-methods research design to examine the interpersonal experiences, military experiences, and psychosocial wellbeing of active-duty military personnel. Survey data and interview data were collected as part of this research effort. Research teams from Claremont Graduate University and the Naval Health Research Center developed the grant proposal, and the Claremont Graduate University research team executed the data collection and analytic efforts. The survey was administered from 2018 to 2019. It was designed to provide a broad overview of military-specific interpersonal and transition experiences, expectations for future military transitions, combat deployment experiences, romantic relationship quality, community-based connectedness and social support, stigma, negative interpersonal experiences, stressful life events, physical health, and psychosocial health and wellbeing among diverse groups of service members. Particular interest was placed on
understanding the impact of PCS and deployment experiences on social networks and resources, as well as discerning how these broad ranges of interpersonal challenges, supports, and health differed between sexual minority and heterosexual service members. The survey contained a vast swath of measures to encapsulate constructs of interest to meet the objectives of the PATH study, and a small selection of variables measured in the PATH research study were used for the current study to test hypotheses of interest. The PATH study was approved by the Claremont Graduate University IRB (CGU IRB #4483).

Participants

To qualify for the PATH study, interested individuals had to be at least 18 years old, on active duty in the U.S. military, in the military for at least 1 year, joined after September 2011 (i.e., after the repeal of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”; H.R. 2965, S.4023), and had to have experienced at least one deployment or PCS. The PATH survey was completed by 997 active-duty service members. Before data analysis, data were screened for insufficient effort responding (IER). IER refers to the derisory effort on the part of the survey participant to complete the survey. This includes pitfalls such as failing to accurately read specific instructions or question stems, and may occur due to fatigue, distraction, boredom, apathy towards research goals, and intentional fraud (e.g., ineligible participants who claimed eligibility to enter the survey). A series of six methods were used to identify both participants who fraudulently completed the survey and those participants who did not contribute adequate effort. First, all participants who failed more than one attention check nested in the PATH survey were removed (n = 96). Next, participants who completed the survey with an average of 3 seconds or less per item were flagged for removal (n = 62). Third, participant data with evidence of straight lining, or selecting the same response for a larger set of items within a group, were flagged for removal.
For the PATH study, groups of 8 items, including at least one reverse-scored item, were used to identify straight-lining participants. Participants who straight-lined on at least 50% of relevant item groups were flagged for removal (n = 8). Next, psychometric antonyms and synonyms were evaluated for discrepancies. Specifically, among positively correlated item pairs, respondents with correlations falling at least two standard deviations below the mean were flagged for removal (n = 81). Conversely, for negatively correlated item pairs, respondents with correlations falling at least two standard deviations above the mean were identified for removal (n = 68). Participants with over 15% missing data throughout the entire survey were also flagged for removal (n = 13). Finally, open-ended text data were examined for suspicious comments. Comments were evaluated by three PATH research staff members for patterns or other oddities (i.e., repeated identical comments or nonsensical statements). Once the staff members reached a consensus, the participants identified through this approach were flagged for removal (n = 18). Participants meeting criteria for at least 3 indices of IER were removed from the final dataset (n = 93), leaving a final sample of 904 participants for the original survey. A manuscript detailing IER methods used to screen PATH data is in preparation. The final PATH sample of 904 participants was diverse across gender, sexual orientation, military branch, race and ethnicity, and rank.

Only participants who self-identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or other sexual minority (e.g., Queer) and who were in romantic relationships with same-gender partners were included in the analytic sample for this study (N = 73). Most participants identified as female (65.8%), and gay or lesbian (90.4%). Most participants were at least 25 years of age (58.9%), and nearly half identified as White or European American (49.3%). Participants were generally well educated – over one-quarter held a Bachelor’s or other higher-education degree. Furthermore, most
participants were not married (61.6%), were in relationships with civilians with no history of military service (72.6%), and currently lived with their romantic partner (54.8%). There was a relatively even distribution of couples together for less than 1 year (34.2%), together between 1 to 2 years (30.1%), and couples together for two years or more (35.6%). The majority of participants did not live with children under 18 in their household (86.3%). There was little representation of active duty officers in the sample; most participants were enlisted (i.e., E1-E9; 91.7%). The distribution of participants by branch paralleled current active duty personnel rates (2022 DoD Demographics Report), with the largest representation of participants in the U.S. Army (64.4%), followed by U.S. Navy (24.7%), U.S. Air Force (8.2%) and U.S. Marine Corps (2.7%). Most service members in this study served at least one tour of duty, with at least 4 years of service at the time of participation (68.5%). Finally, fewer participants had deployment experiences (71.2%) than PCS experiences (93.2%). Women in this sample were in shorter relationships (less than 1 year; 37.5%) compared to men (28.0%), and men were in relatively longer relationships (two years or more; 44%) than women (31.3%). A higher proportion of women respondents have never lived with their partner (31.3%) compared to men who have never lived with their partner (20.0%). There were no women in the U.S. Marine Corps and no men in the U.S. Air Force in this sample. See Table 1 for sample characteristics.
Table 1
*Sample Characteristics*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sociodemographic characteristic</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>65.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>34.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sexual Identity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay or Lesbian</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>90.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bisexual or Queer</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18-21</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>12.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22-24</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-27</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>32.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28+</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race and Ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian or Asian American</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black or African American</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>27.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic or Latino</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiple Races/Ethnicities</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White or European American</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>49.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>61.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>38.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Spouse/partner military status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently in the military</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former military</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civilian – no military service</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>72.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Cohabiting status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never lived with spouse/partner</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>27.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, but I have lived with my spouse/partner in the past</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>17.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently live with spouse/partner</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>54.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Relationship length

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Length</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>34.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 year – less than 2 years</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>30.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 years or more</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>35.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Monogamy status

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not monogamous</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>30.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Currently monogamous</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>69.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Number of children under 18 in the household

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>86.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 or more</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Rank

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>E1-E4</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E5-E6</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>45.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E7-E9</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O1-O3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Branch

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Branch</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Navy</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>24.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marine Corps</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Air Force</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Army</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>64.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Years in service at time of participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3 years or fewer</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>31.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-5 years</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>34.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
More than 5 years 25 34.2%

**Education**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>High school diploma, GED, or ABE certificate</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college, but no degree</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate’s/2-year degree/technical degree</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s/4-year degree or higher</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>26.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Number of PCSs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of PCSs</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>43.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>32.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 or more</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>16.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Number of deployments**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of deployments</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>28.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>56.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>11.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 or more</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Procedures**

Efforts were made to recruit participants from all branches of service, and recruitment efforts sought to oversample women and sexual minority (i.e., LGB) service members. To this end, several convenience sampling recruitment methods were used, including passive and active web-based and community-based study promotion efforts, and snowball and referral techniques. To become recognizable throughout recruitment efforts, a PATH logo was created and used across all recruitment materials (see Appendix A: PATH study logo). Recruitment announcements were delivered through personal social media networks and LGB and military-specific social media group administrators with encouragement to share the announcement more broadly and were posted as advertisements on popular social media sites (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Reddit; see Appendix B: PATH Social Media Recruitment Message). E-mails (see Appendix C: PATH Recruiting Email) were sent to individual members of an expert advisory board, including LGB military personnel, leadership, and psychologists in the field, to request that they publicize the project by posting or distributing a study flyer (see Appendix D: PATH Recruitment Flyer) to promote the study within their social and professional networks. In addition, recruitment flyers were placed in clubs, coffee shops, restaurants, gyms, and other in-person locations frequented by LGB individuals near local military bases. Recruitment materials included links to a study website (see Appendix E: PATH Study Website) offering more information about the study overall, how to become a PATH participant, and staff contact information should the potential participant have questions about the study. Research staff hosted vendor tables at local community events (e.g., Gay Pride) during which interested participants provided their email addresses to later receive specific study information and recruitment material.
These recruitment methods were augmented using Qualtrics Panel Research Services to recruit a portion of the participants for the questionnaire. Qualtrics Panel Research Services recruits groups of participants to respond to a survey, allowing researchers with Qualtrics surveys to directly reach a target audience based on demographic criteria (https://www.qualtrics.com/research-services/online-sample/). Qualtrics Panel participants were recruited from various sources, including email listservs, websites, social media, and other web-based recruiting strategies. Qualtrics Panel participants were invited to take part in the PATH survey via email invitation on a survey platform (see Appendix F: Qualtrics Email Invitation). A survey link was embedded in the invitation for participants. Participants recruited by Qualtrics received redeemable points for completing questionnaires, with the precise number of points depending on how long participants have been panel members and the number of surveys they have completed.

All recruitment announcements directed potential participants to visit a project website where further information regarding the study could be found. On the website, potential participants were provided with more detailed information about the study’s purpose and methods and an opportunity to sign up for the study. To ensure eligibility, participants completed an eligibility screening. Next, participants reviewed the informed consent form.

The informed consent form described the study rationale, eligibility criteria, and what is involved in study participation. Specifically, participants learned that the purpose of the study was to collect information from military members about interpersonal challenges, sources of stress, and support. Following this, participants learned that should they agree to participate in the study, they would receive an online survey to complete during their off-duty time. Participants read that the survey would take up to 60 minutes to complete, and included
questions about personal characteristics (sex, age, marital status, etc.), military background (rank, deployment history, etc.), as well as social challenges, support, and stressors they have experienced while in the military.

In the informed consent form, participants learned that some of the questions on the PATH survey are sensitive and may remind them of experiences that were embarrassing, stressful, or emotionally or physically painful (e.g. sexual activity, harassment, mental health treatment). Participants were reminded that the survey was voluntary to complete and that they did not need to answer any specific question they were uncomfortable answering. They learned that the survey was anonymous, and they did not need to provide any personally identifying information, except to receive their electronic Amazon gift card code at the end of the survey. Even then, they were redirected to a different survey to enter the email address they chose to receive the electronic Amazon gift card code to ensure their data were in no way connected to their email address. Furthermore, participants had the option and were provided with instructions to create a new Gmail address specifically to receive their electronic Amazon gift card code. Furthermore, participants learned of the extensive measures put into place to protect their anonymity. Participants read about the potential risks of taking part in the study, including the risk that the privacy of their survey responses may be compromised.

To protect their privacy, the informed consent form recommended that all surveys be completed privately and on a non-DoD computer or device, where other people may not see participants’ responses. The informed consent form included a link to resources and the Principal Investigator’s contact information should participants become distressed or upset due to participating. Participants learned that they were not expected to receive any direct benefits from taking part in the PATH study. Still, the information they provide will assist in expanding the
information available to the DoD regarding the social challenges and supports that service members encounter. Participants read that the information they provide during the PATH survey will be used to identify important factors affecting the quality of life of military personnel and may influence policy or practice in ways that will improve the quality of life of service members. Participants read that the survey would take about up to 60 minutes to complete and learned that they would be remunerated with a $40 electronic Amazon gift card for taking part in PATH. Finally, participants received a link to download the informed consent form for their records. To enter the survey, participants had to meet all eligibility criteria, provide consent, and successfully complete a Completely Automated Public Turing test to tell Computers and Humans Apart (CAPTCHA). The CAPTCHA is used to deter bots from accessing the survey. The “Prevent Ballot Box Stuffing” Qualtrics feature was enabled to prevent participants from accessing the survey more than once. This feature places a cookie on the participant’s browser, disallowing them from re-accessing the survey.

Next, participants entered general demographic information to inform display logic programmed throughout the survey and created a unique participant ID code. As an additional security measure, participants completed three multiple-choice screener questions, requiring basic branch-specific knowledge of insignias and uniforms. Participants who did not answer all three questions correctly were blocked from completing the study questionnaire and removed from the study.

After successfully passing the screening, participants moved forward to complete the questionnaire. The questionnaire included items about participants’ personal and military characteristics, experiences of PCS/deployment and expectations about future transitions, experiences of stressors and social support within and outside the military, characteristics of their
social networks, and health, health behaviors, and psychological functioning. Participants were informed that they could skip any question they would rather not answer and may leave the questionnaire at any time should they choose to do so. Again, to protect their confidentiality, participants were provided with instructions for obtaining a new email address to use for this study (i.e., for receiving their gift card, and learning about other research participation opportunities) at the end of the survey.

After finishing the survey, participants received an end-of-survey message thanking them for their time and with links to resources if survey items reminded them of difficult past experiences or emotions and a link to the informed consent form should they choose to download it. Once again, contact information for the study coordinator and principal investigator was provided, and all participants were asked to share the study website with other service members in their social network who may be interested in taking part. Then, participants recruited through convenience sampling methods were redirected to a separate website to enter their email addresses to receive their gift card codes. Participants recruited through Qualtrics were remunerated with a previously agreed-upon number of points which could be exchanged for items of their choosing.

Measures

The following section only describes variables used in the current analyses rather than a comprehensive description of all study constructs included in the PATH questionnaire. For a complete list of PATH survey items included in the primary analyses for this study, see Appendix G.

Demographics and Relationship Characteristics. Participants provided demographic information and relationship characteristics, including their gender, race, rank, whether their
partner had a military history, whether participants live with their romantic partners, and romantic relationship length. All measures used to assess demographics and relationship characteristics were categorical in nature.

**Transition-Related Stress.** PATH participants received a set of follow-up questions based on whether they experienced a deployment or PCS. Participants who have experienced both at least one PCS and one deployment were asked which transition was more recent. If participants reported the deployment as the most recent transition experience, they were presented with a set of follow-up questions specific to their last deployment. Conversely, if participants reported the PCS as the most recent transition experience, they were presented with a set of follow-up questions specific to their last PCS. Thus, participants who experienced both transitions were only asked about stress, among other transition-specific items, as a function of their most recent deployment or PCS. For those participants who deployed \( n = 19 \), deployment stress was measured with a single item developed for the purpose of the study. Participants rated the item, “As a result of your most recent deployment, how much stress did you have in your work life?” on a scale from 1 (None at all) to 5 (A great deal). Among those participants receiving the PCS follow-up items \( n = 52 \), participants rated the item “During your most recent PCS, how much stress did you have in your work life?” on a scale from 1 (None at all) to 5 (A great deal). Deployment-related stress was, on average, higher than PCS-related stress \((M = 3.53, SD = 1.61; M = 2.71, SD = 1.23\), respectively; Overall \(M = 2.93, SD = 1.38\)\). Items were combined to create a single-item indicator of transition-related stress.

**Romantic Relationship Quality.** The 8-item romantic relationship quality measure was comprised of one item on romantic relationship closeness, one item on satisfaction with emotional support, one item on overall relationship satisfaction, one item on love, and four items
on perceived partner responsiveness. The closeness item was adapted from the original Subjective Closeness Inventory (SCI; Berscheid et al., 1989). Participants responded to a single item “How close is your relationship compared to your other relationships (e.g., relationships with friends or family members)?” using a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (much less close) to 5 (much closer). To measure satisfaction with support, participants responded to the question “How satisfied are you with the emotional support and assistance you get from your spouse/partner?” Response options ranged from 1 (extremely dissatisfied) to 5 (extremely satisfied).

One item adapted from the Relationship Satisfaction Subscale of the Investment Model Scale (Rusbult et al., 1998) indicated overall romantic relationship satisfaction. Participants respond to the single item “Overall, how satisfied are you with your relationship?” using a 5-point Likert-type scale from 1 (extremely dissatisfied) to 5 (extremely satisfied). One original item was used to assess love (“I love my partner”). Participants responded to items described above using a 5-point scale (1 – strongly disagree, to 5 – strongly agree). The four items on perceived partner responsiveness were comprised of modified items from Gable and colleagues’ (2012) three-item scale (e.g., “My partner understands me,” and “my partner values my abilities and opinions”) and one item was adapted from Overall and Hammond’s (2013) Relationship Insecurity Measure (“I feel secure in my relationship with my partner”). Participants responded to the perceived partner responsiveness items described above using a 5-point scale (1 – strongly disagree, to 5 – strongly agree). Items were aggregated and averaged to create a measure of romantic relationship quality, with higher scores indicating higher romantic relationship quality. Romantic relationship quality was high in this sample ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 0.59$). Altogether, items demonstrated strong reliability in this sample ($\alpha = .89$).
**LGB Community Connectedness.** This measure was drawn from Omoto and Snyder’s (2009) measure of psychological sense of community. The LGB community was the focal community for each item (e.g., “I have a sense of belonging with the LGB community,” and “Being a member of the LGB community is very important to me.”) Participants completed the adapted 11-item measure with a response scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Scores on all items were averaged, with higher scores representing a stronger sense of psychological community. LGB community connectedness was high, on average, in this sample ($M = 3.69$, $SD = 1.16$) and demonstrated strong reliability ($\alpha = .86$).

**Military Commitment.** Military commitment and career intentions were assessed with two items adapted from the DoD Questionnaire of Health-Related Behaviors and an existing Organizational Commitment Scale (Allen & Meyer, 1990; Barlas et al., 2013; Gade et al., 2003; Meyer & Allen, 1984;). A composite mean score of commitment (How committed are you to having a career in the military?) and intention to stay in the military (Do you want to continue serving in the military beyond the end of your current obligation?) were used as a measure of military commitment. Response sets included 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*), and 1 (*definitely no*) to 5 (*definitely yes*), respectively. This measure demonstrated strong reliability in this sample ($\alpha = .90$). Military commitment was also generally high in this sample ($M = 3.34$; $SD = 1.16$)

**Preliminary Analyses**

Descriptive statistics were used to assess overall distributions and patterns of association between constructs of interest. Means, standard deviations, skewness, and kurtosis were examined. Because all variables are either dichotomized or continuous, zero-order correlations were examined for bivariate associations (Field, 2013).
Romantic relationship functioning was skewed and affected by kurtosis with values greater than the absolute value of 1 and 3, respectively (skew = -1.749, kurtosis = 3.285). That is, most participants reported very high romantic relationship functioning overall. Because the data were negatively skewed (long tail to the left), the strategy offered by Tabachnik and Fidell (2001) is to reflect the variable, first, and then apply the logarithmic transformation for a positive skew.

Given the negative skew, romantic relationship functioning was first reflected and then transformed using a logarithmic transformation (Log10). The variable was then re-reflected to ensure correct interpretation. The transformed variable was no longer skewed and was no longer affected by kurtosis (skew = .887, kurtosis = .356). All other continuous variables were normally distributed. There were no multivariate outliers as assessed using the Mahalanobis distance technique. Because of the relatively small sample size, analyses were conducted without control variables. Two participants did not respond to transition-related stress. Otherwise, there were no missing data. Correlations for demographic and primary study variables are reported in Table 2, though note that demographic variables were not entered in analytic models given that the sample size was not sufficient to use these variables as controls. Thus, their inclusion is purely descriptive.

Romantic relationship quality was negatively associated with military commitment – lower romantic relationship quality was linked with higher military commitment among military personnel in this sample ($p = .049$). Female participants reported more transition-related stress relative to male participants ($p = .042$), and junior enlisted participants reported more transition-related stress ($p = .007$) and better relationship quality ($p = .017$), and lower military commitment ($p = .015$) relative to higher-ranking participants. Participants living with their
romantic partners reported higher romantic relationship quality \((p = .004)\) and greater transition-related stress \((p = .006)\) than participants not living with their romantic partners. There were no other significant or marginally significant correlations.
### Table 2

Zero-order correlations for demographic variables, relationship characteristics, and primary study variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>5</th>
<th>6</th>
<th>7</th>
<th>8</th>
<th>9</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Gender</td>
<td>.66</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Race</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Rank</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Partner military status</td>
<td>.73</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Cohabiting status</td>
<td>.55</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>-.02</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>-.19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Relationship length</td>
<td>.36</td>
<td>.48</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.14</td>
<td>-.25*</td>
<td>.27*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Transition-related stress</td>
<td>2.93</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>.24*</td>
<td>-.05</td>
<td>-.32**</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>.33**</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. LGB community</td>
<td>3.69</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.06</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.13</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>-.08</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>connectedness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Romantic rel. quality (transformed)</td>
<td>4.49</td>
<td>.59</td>
<td>.14</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td>-.28*</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.33**</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Military commitment</td>
<td>3.34</td>
<td>1.16</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.29*</td>
<td>-.07</td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td>-.17</td>
<td>-.10</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.23*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. M and SD are used to represent mean and standard deviation, respectively. * indicates p < .05, ** indicates p < .01. All continuous items measured on 5-point scales with higher values indicating greater perceptions of each construct. Demographic variables dichotomized as follows: Gender (0 = Male, 1 = Female), Race (0 = White, 1 = Latino, Black, Asian, Pacific Islander, Multiple Race), Rank (0 = E4 and below, 1 = E5 and above), Partner military status (0 = current or former military member, 1 = no history of military service), Cohabiting status (0 = not living together, 1 = living together), Relationship length (0 = 2 years or less, 1 = more than 2 years).
Primary Analyses

Bivariate correlations were analyzed to address hypothesis 1. The Hayes’ PROCESS macro with bootstrapping (Hayes, 2017) was used to provide estimates and significance of all hypothesized paths in hypotheses 2-3. PROCESS provides more stable results compared to alternative methods of mediation or moderation tests (Hayes, 2017; Zhao et al., 2010).

*Hypothesis 1:* Hypothesis 1 predicted that higher levels of transition-related stress would be associated with (a) lower romantic relationship quality and (b) lower military commitment. Bivariate correlational analysis did not reveal any significant relationships between transition-related stress, and romantic relationship quality ($r = .18$, $p = .13$), or military commitment ($r = -.10$, $p = .43$). Hypothesis 1 was not supported.

*Hypothesis 2:* Hypothesis 2 predicted an interaction between transition-related stress and LGB community connectedness on romantic relationship quality, such that service members with greater transition-related stress and lower community connectedness would report significantly lower romantic relationship quality compared to those participants with lower transition-related stress, and that there will be no significant differences in romantic relationship quality between those groups with higher LGB community connectedness. A moderation analysis using Hayes’ PROCESS macro Model 1 was performed. Transition-related stress was entered as the focal predictor, LGB community connectedness was entered as the moderator, and romantic relationship quality was entered as the dependent variable. All variables that defined products were mean centered.

A significant interaction emerged; romantic relationship quality was higher when LGB community connectedness was higher, and transition-related stress did not condition that effect. However, when LGB community connectedness was lower, higher transition-related stress was
associated with higher romantic relationship quality ($F(1, 67) = 4.20, p = .04. \Delta R^2=.06$).

Altogether, 11.9% of the variance in romantic relationship quality was predicted by all variables in the model, $R^2 = 0.119, F(3, 67) = 3.01, p = .036$. Table 3 displays unstandardized regression coefficients.

The interaction between LGB community connectedness and transition-related stress was significant ($p = .04$), indicating that LGB community connectedness moderated the effect of transition-related stress on romantic relationship quality. Though analyses revealed a statistically significant moderation, it was in an unexpected direction and, ultimately, this hypothesis was not supported. The interaction is displayed in Figure 2. The graph shows that romantic relationship quality is higher when LGB community connectedness is also higher. In this case, transition stress does not matter. However, when LGB community connectedness is low, transition stress is associated with romantic relationship quality. Higher stress is associated with higher romantic relationship quality.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>B</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.40</td>
<td>84.44</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>[1.37; 1.43]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRS</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>[0.01; 0.05]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGB CC</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>[0.01; 0.09]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRS x LGB CC</td>
<td>-0.03</td>
<td>-2.05</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>[-0.06; -0.01]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note.** TRS = Transition-Related Stress, LGB CC = Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Connectedness.
Figure 2

*Interaction between LGB Community Connectedness and Transition-Related Stress on Romantic Relationship Quality*

Note. TRS = Transition-Related Stress, LGB CC = Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Connectedness.
Table 4 displays the conditional effects of transition-related stress on romantic relationship quality at different values of LGB community connectedness. This table shows that the effects of transition-related stress on romantic relationship quality are only statistically significant when LGB community connectedness is at the mean or one standard deviation below the mean, as evidenced by 95% confidence intervals that do not include zero.

**Hypothesis 3:** The final goal was to examine whether romantic relationship quality explains the association between transition-related stress and military commitment, and whether that relationship varies by levels of LGB community connectedness. In the first linear regression model (using Model 7 in PROCESS; Hayes, 2017), transition-related stress was entered as the focal predictor, with romantic relationship quality as the mediator and military commitment as the dependent variable. LGB community connectedness was entered as the moderator variable on the relationship between transition-related stress and romantic relationship quality. No evidence was found to support a moderated mediation model, indicated by the index of moderated mediation with a CI overlapping zero (Index = .06, SE = .05, 95% CI [-.008, .192]). Table 5 displays unstandardized regression coefficients testing the effects of transition-related stress and romantic relationship quality on military commitment. Even though the relationships do not reach statistical significance, a negative association between romantic relationship quality and military commitment is approaching statistical significance.
Table 4
Conditional effects of transition-related stress on romantic relationship quality at values of LGB community connectedness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LGB CC</th>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>SE</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-.775</td>
<td>0.05</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>2.66</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>[0.01; 0.09]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.000</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>2.12</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>[0.01; 0.05]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>.775</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.02</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>0.95</td>
<td>[-0.03; 0.03]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. LGB CC = Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Community Connectedness. Conditioning values in this table reflect -1 SD, Mean, and +1SD respectively.
Table 5
Summary of linear regression analysis predicting military commitment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>B</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>5.97</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>[3.25; 8.69]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TRS</td>
<td>-.046</td>
<td>-0.45</td>
<td>.653</td>
<td>[-0.25; 0.16]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RRQ</td>
<td>-1.88</td>
<td>-1.95</td>
<td>.056</td>
<td>[-3.81; 0.05]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. TRS = Transition-Related Stress, RRQ = Romantic Relationship Quality
Table 6 displays the conditional indirect effects of transition-related stress on military commitment through romantic relationship quality based on varying levels of LGB community connectedness. Again, though the results do not reach statistical significance, the effects of transition-related stress on military commitment through romantic relationship quality approach statistical significance for low and average levels of LGB community connectedness, paralleling patterns of effects from the significant interaction in Table 4.

Thus, the predicted moderated mediation model with transition-related stress as the focal predictor was not supported. However, findings suggest that there may be a moderated mediation that is potentially diluted by the underpowered nature of the sample size for this study and the low variance in romantic relationship quality.
Table 6
Conditional indirect effects of transition-related stress on military commitment through romantic relationship quality at different levels of LGB community connectedness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>$b$</th>
<th>BootSE</th>
<th>Boot 95% CI</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Low LGB CC</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>[-0.24, 0.01]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medium LGB CC</td>
<td>-0.05</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>[-0.12, 0.01]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High LGB CC</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>[-0.06, 0.10]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* LGB CC = LGB Community Connectedness.
Discussion

Study 1 used data from the PATH study to assess relationships between transition-related stress, LGB community connectedness, romantic relationship quality, and military commitment among sexual minority service members. On a theoretical level, Study 1 is unique in that it extends work-family conflict within the context of sexual minority military families by examining the interplay between work-specific stress and romantic relationship quality, while taking LGB community connectedness into account. Further, this study contributes to the broader literature on military families by elucidating the nature of the relationship between transition-related stress and romantic relationship quality, whether the effects of LGB community connectedness buffers this relationship, and, ultimately, how this impacts warfighters’ commitment to military service.

In this study, and contrary to Hypothesis 1, transition-related stress and romantic relationship quality were not associated. One possible explanation for this finding is that service members may effectively compartmentalize stress due to work and their romantic relationship – finding other mechanisms to protect their romantic relationship from external stressors. Of note, service members in this sample reported very high romantic relationship quality in general. These service members may have romantic relationships that are robust against the effects of transition-related stress, or higher romantic relationship quality may protect service members from experiencing too much stress at work – diluting otherwise difficult work experiences because of the positive source of support within the romantic relationship. This explanation is consistent with prior literature assessing the effects of social support on stress, and romantic relationships as one such source of social support. Namely, social support, and especially support from romantic partners, can prevent the effects of stress by both thinning the stress perceived by
the service member or promoting constructive behaviors to cope with stressors (Cohen & McKay, 1984; Cohen & Wills, 1985; House, 1981). For example, in a study of same-sex-attracted youth, romantic relationships served as a buffer against the effects of stressors (Baams et al., 2014). In a sample comprised of gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples, social support from romantic partners was significantly more likely than support from friends and family to protect individuals from the consequences of stress. This finding was robust across all types of couples, regardless of gender makeup (Graham & Barnow, 2013). The same factors may be at play, here, such that sexual minority service members’ relationship quality protects them from experiencing stress.

Interestingly, romantic relationship quality was negatively associated with military commitment. Though not explicitly hypothesized, this finding warrants further investigation. This statistically significant correlation, albeit weak, revealed insights about the potential interplay between romantic relationship quality and military commitment. Rather than denigrating romantic relationships to keep service members committed to the military, it could be that military life is not exceptionally conducive to relationship or family goals. Service members who are close with their partners, responsive to their needs, and value their opinions may be more easily swayed to leave the service if military life does not fit future plans for the relationship or family growth. In addition, exploratory work revealed interesting differences in study constructs by demographic variables and relationship characteristics. Specifically, female-identified participants in this study reported greater levels of transition-related stress compared to male-identified counterparts. Junior enlisted military personnel reported more transition-related stress, greater romantic relationship quality, and lower military commitment than higher-ranking counterparts. Participants living with their romantic partners reported greater romantic
relationship quality and greater transition-related stress than participants not living with their romantic partners. This question of the nature of these exploratory associations is elucidated by qualitative findings in Study 2.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that LGB community connectedness would condition the proposed relationship between transition-related stress and romantic relationship quality. A statistically significant moderation was found yet exposed an unanticipated pattern. Romantic relationship quality was higher when LGB community connectedness was higher – in that case, transition-related stress did not have any effect on romantic relationship quality. However, transition-related stress was associated with romantic relationship quality when LGB community connectedness was lower. Said differently, higher levels of stress were associated with higher relationship functioning and lower (and average) levels of stress are associated with lower relationship functioning, when LGB community connectedness is lower. Though this was contrary to expectations, this finding is particularly thought-provoking because it sheds a different light on the interchange between stressors stemming from unique military experiences and romantic relationship quality for sexual minority individuals. It could be that, among people who are less psychologically connected to the LGB community, military couples may flourish when faced with stressful experiences. Prior literature on military families suggests numerous strengths among military couples – namely, that military couples are resilient. Recently, Pflieger and colleagues (2020) used a family-resilience-based theoretical framework to explore strengths among a large sample of 9,642 married heterosexual U.S. military couples. Using data from the Millennium Cohort Family Study (Crum-Cianflone et al., 2014), researchers found that military couples were generally high on indicators of strength (i.e., positive outlook, self-mastery, social support, and problem-solving abilities within the family unit). Nearly 60% of both members of
the military couple in their sample demonstrated high levels across different indices of strength (Pflieger et al., 2020).

Finally, after considering the moderation effects previously described, the full moderated mediation model (Hypothesis 3) was not supported - romantic relationship quality did not significantly mediate the path between transition-related stress and military commitment for sexual minority service members. Although the mediation effect was not statistically significant, the addition of romantic relationship quality as a mediator did demonstrate improvement that approached the level of statistical support. Significance testing should not be the end-all consideration when appraising statistical findings so that the inherent risks of Types I and II errors (e.g., not recognizing a significant association due to low power) would be reduced (Kline, 2004). Using G*Power (Erdfelder et al., 1996), a sample size of 395 participants is necessary to detect a small effect with alpha set at .05 and power at .80 for an interaction with one tested predictor and three total predictors. The tested sample in the moderation and moderated mediation analyses presented in this study was 71. However, even with underpowered analyses, the results presented may have practical or clinical importance and warrant further investigation. Clinicians working with same-gender military couples should be aware of the effects of work stress on military commitment, and how promoting romantic relationship quality is key to diluting the effects of stress.

There are some critical limitations in Study 1 to consider. It is imperative to note that mediation findings depend highly on sample size (Rucker et al., 2011). All else being equal, as sample sizes in research studies increase, researchers are more likely to find significant effects if one actually exists (Rucker et al., 2011). The small sample size in this study may be an obstacle to detecting moderated mediation, however, it is important to consider the difficulty inherent in
reaching marginalized groups in research (Holloway et al., 2021). In addition, data were derived from nonprobability sampling methods. That said, results should be interpreted with some degree of caution and with the understanding that this study effectively skims the surface of a broader understanding of same-gender romantic relationships in the military. Moreover, the sample was relatively homogenous and used non-probability sampling methods, limiting the generalizability of the results.

In addition, these data are cross-sectional. Many limitations are associated with this approach, especially issues with directionality (e.g., not elucidating cause from effect). Thus, it is unclear if lower romantic relationship quality leads to higher military commitment or vice versa, or if lower military commitment contributes to improved romantic relationship quality or vice versa. Thus, this research certainly provides information on the characterization of military romantic relationships and military commitment – but lacks an understanding of additional factors or sources of stress that contribute to positive relationship quality in same-gender military couples. Moreover, longitudinal studies allow researchers to identify predictors of relationship functioning rather than simply identifying correlates of relationship functioning. A longitudinal research approach is the only mechanism by which we can understand differences in relationship functioning over relationship phases over time. This approach is imperative in military romantic relationships given the numerous milestones, acute but consistent challenges military couples face, and time-bound challenges inherent in military transitions. For example, longitudinal research would allow for a more nuanced understanding of relationship quality as a function of transition phases overlaid with years into a romantic relationship or at what point the relationship was initiated (e.g., within 3 months of a deployment, immediately before a PCS). Deployment cycles include pre-deployment workups, the deployment itself (both in terms of type of
deployment and length of deployment), and post-deployment reintegration; each phase with its own set of stressors (Meadows et al., 2017). Concerning PCS moves, each phase, from selecting a duty station, re-organizing personal goals, or living situations, preparing for a move, and acclimating to a new location, may have unique stressors that contribute to or are affected by romantic relationship quality. Thus, future research ought to leverage longitudinal methods to better elucidate the nature of relationships between factors impacting military couples, as more longitudinal studies are needed to establish causal links between military-specific stressors or experiences, romantic relationship functioning, and military commitment for sexual minority service members.

This research also focuses on the experiences of sexual minority service members, excluding specific experiences related to gender-diverse service members (i.e., any service member with a gender identity that does not match their sex assigned at birth) because of the policy surrounding transgender service members’ right to serve openly in the U.S. military. Future research should focus efforts on the unique experiences of transgender service members to support gender-diverse romantic relationships and promote commitment to military service.

There were additional methodological limitations in this study with respect to study measures. The single-item measure of transition-related stress may not have adequately captured all aspects of work stress inherent in military transitions. Other dynamics of transition-related work stress include stress from interactions with leadership, stress from interactions with military peers, stress from external combat or mission-specific experiences, or general stress from the work itself. Thus, this measure was perhaps not sensitive enough to encapsulate these different facets of transition-related work stress. Other sources of stress, including not only work-specific stress but stress on romantic relationships, personal stress, stress on other family relationships,
financial stress, and so forth, were also missing from this measure. These additional dimensions of stress, or aggregate levels of stress across these dimensions, may differentially impact romantic relationship quality and military commitment.

In addition to the limitations of a single-item measure of stress, the average rating of romantic relationship quality was very high (i.e., 4.49 on a 5-point scale), suggesting possible ceiling effect (Cramer & Howitt, 2004). This may be a function of limitations in the measure sensitivity. The LGB community connectedness measure did not explicitly tap into geographical connectedness to the LGB community and the importance of physical community embeddedness. Because of the nature of geographical moves, it could be that actually being involved in a geographically close LGB community or building connections with other LGB people in new cities either after PCSs or during deployments helps strengthen romantic relationships or prevents stress as a function of PCSs or deployments. Given feelings of isolation that military families may experience during transitions (e.g., Drummet et al., 2003; Ross et al., 2021), physical closeness to salient communities may be a more critical factor for same-gender romantic relationships. Prior research suggests that being geographically close to members of an important community is protective against the effects of stress (e.g., Barnes & Duck, 1994), and so, it could be that geographical connectedness with LGB people may be more relevant for military communities than psychological connectedness given the extent and frequency within which military personnel relocate throughout their careers. As such, future research may specifically ask about connectedness with local geographical communities and may seek to explicate types of community connectedness and the effects of geographical (vs. psychological) connectedness on buffering stressors or improving romantic relationships. Further, the LGB community connectedness measure included items on ostracism, internalized homonegativity,
and perceived support as an LGB service member, which may emerge as different factors separate from LGB community connectedness threatening the validity of this measure. Meaningfulness and influence of the LGB community will be explored further in Study 2.

Different types of communities may be more or less important based on salient personal identities. Understanding challenges faced by sexual minority and gender-diverse service members who are racial or ethnic minorities becomes more important as diversity continues to increase in the military. All things considered, results from study 1 show that romantic relationship quality may flourish in the throes of deployment and PCS stress, yet many issues still need further examination. Moreover, the gradations of the influence of military life on romantic relationship quality are not especially understood. To advance knowledge in this area, Study 2 methodologically expanded this area of work by attending to the actual perspectives of military personnel in same-gender romantic relationships through one-on-one interviews.
Chapter IV. Study 2

Study 1 suggested there is much more to learn about the intricacies of same-gender romantic relationships in the military and how, if at all, relationship quality affects military commitment and the barriers and facilitators that come into play. From Study 1, it is now anticipated that rather than psychological community connectedness, actual geographical connectedness with other members of the LGBT community may be practically more important for same-gender romantic relationships. Furthermore, there is more to learn about whether or how deployment- and PCS-related stress impacts romantic relationship quality and vice versa. Study 2 illuminated these findings through one-on-one semi-structured interviews with active-duty service members in romantic relationships. This study aims to gain in-depth insight into the interplay between military life and romantic relationships among service members in same-gender couples, and ultimately to better understand the role romantic relationships play in military commitment. Interview data were analyzed using an Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach. The objective of IPA is to conduct an in-depth exploration of how individuals make sense of their personal, relational, and social experiences (Smith et al., 2013; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Phenomenological research is an experiential methodological approach that describes common throughlines between several individuals’ lived experiences of a phenomenon, ultimately to make meaning of or to make sense of these significant experiences. This approach was most suitable for this research study because it is critical to understand several service members’ shared experiences of a phenomenon – being in a same-gender relationship against the backdrop of a military career and undergoing deployments or geographical relocations during those romantic relationships.

Method
Participants

Given that IPA involves a detailed exploration of participants’ lives, IPA research is most often conducted using small and generally homogenous sample sizes – foregoing breadth for depth (Creswell, 2013; Smith & Nizza, 2022). To be eligible to participate, and to align as closely as possible with PATH study eligibility criteria for inclusion in Study 1, participants had to 1) be at least 18 years old; 2) be an active-duty service member (i.e., currently on active service in the U.S. Navy, U.S. Marine Corps, U.S. Army (including active National Guard), or U.S. Air Force) or a recent veteran (within 1 year of leaving military service); 3) have joined the military following the repeal of DADT (September 2011); 4) have served for at least one full year; 5) be in a romantic relationship, and 6) have completed at least one PCS or deployment during their romantic relationship.

A total of 14 participants took part in the interview study, including 3 self-identified men and 11 self-identified women. Seven participants were recruited through close social networks, four were recruited through social media posts, and other participants in the study referred the remaining three participants. The average age of participants was 32.14 years ($SD = 4.19$ years, range 23 years – 40 years). All but two participants were on active duty. Of the 14 participants, 8 were in the Navy, 3 were in the Army or Army National Guard, 2 were in the Air Force, and 1 participant was in the Marine Corps. Most participants were White Non-Hispanic ($n = 10$), followed by Latino ($n = 3$) and mixed race ($n = 1$). The average length of time in service was 9.46 years ($SD = 2.30$ years, range: 6 years to 12 years). Relationships ranged from 3 months to 12.5 years, with an average relationship length of 4.31 years. Finally, six of the participants were in dual-military relationships with one another. Three couples (all self-identified as women) interviewed for this study. Each interview was conducted at different times, and participants did
not have their spouse or partner in the same room during the interview. Of the eight remaining participants, three were in dual-military relationships and five were in relationships with civilian partners. For participant pseudonyms with associated self-identified gender, branch, rank, and relationship length, see Table 7.
Table 7

*Interview Participant Characteristics (N = 14)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Branch</th>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Relationship Length</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>U.S. Navy</td>
<td>Enlisted</td>
<td>2 years or less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>U.S. Navy</td>
<td>Enlisted</td>
<td>2 years or less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chloe</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>U.S. Navy</td>
<td>Enlisted</td>
<td>More than 2 years to 5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>U.S. Marine Corps</td>
<td>Enlisted</td>
<td>2 years or less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helena</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>U.S. Air Force</td>
<td>Officer</td>
<td>More than 5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janine</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>U.S. Air Force</td>
<td>Enlisted</td>
<td>More than 2 years to 5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>U.S. Navy</td>
<td>Enlisted</td>
<td>2 years or less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lacey</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>U.S. Navy</td>
<td>Officer</td>
<td>More than 5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>U.S. Navy</td>
<td>Enlisted</td>
<td>More than 5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rebecca</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>U.S. Navy</td>
<td>Enlisted</td>
<td>2 years or less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandy</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>U.S. Army</td>
<td>Enlisted</td>
<td>2 years or less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>U.S. Army/National Guard</td>
<td>Enlisted</td>
<td>More than 2 years to 5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>U.S. Navy</td>
<td>Enlisted</td>
<td>More than 2 years to 5 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vanessa</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>U.S. Army/National Guard</td>
<td>Enlisted</td>
<td>More than 2 years to 5 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Procedures

A purposeful chain-referral strategy (i.e., snowballing) was used to recruit participants for this study. Beginning with military networks in the investigator’s social circles, eligible service members were invited to participate and were asked to refer another active-duty service member in a same-gender romantic relationship to participate in the study. Participants who completed the interview study were also asked to share information about the study and the researcher’s contact information with other eligible personnel interested in volunteering for the study. Study information was also posted in community (e.g., military housing) and rank or occupation-based (e.g., officer groups, hospital corpsman groups) military and LGBT social media groups, with administrator permission, to help spread the word about the interview study. Social media posts were made “shareable” so individuals who saw the post could re-post the study information on their personal social media pages or within their own social media military or LGBT groups. All participants were remunerated with a $10 Amazon gift card code to thank them for contributing to the study. Claremont Graduate University IRB (CGU IRB #4483) reviewed and approved this study procedure.

All interviews were over the phone and scheduled via text message or email. After indicating interest in the study, potential participants received a Qualtrics link to an informed consent statement and sign-up page. Participants read that the study aimed to learn more about romantic relationship quality and military commitment among service members in same-gender romantic relationships and involved participating in an audio-recorded 25-45 minute one-on-one phone interview. Participants reviewed a synopsis of the interview content and example items, to include questions about their experiences in a romantic relationship during active duty service, their commitment to the military, and their connection with the military and LGBT communities.
The informed consent form described participation risks, including the risk of temporary discomfort and emotional distress, and the risk of compromised privacy if someone were to overhear their interview. Participants received an explanation of how their privacy was protected and precautions taken to minimize risks, as well as a reminder that their participation was completely voluntary and they may skip any questions that caused discomfort or end the interview at any time without consequence.

Participants were encouraged to contact the project Principal Investigator or research advisor to ensure all questions were answered before providing consent. The informed consent form included information about what participation entails, including the risks and benefits of taking part, resources, and contact information for those participants who may become distressed as a result of the interview study. In addition, the informed consent form included assurances of confidentiality of responses and information on their rights as participants. Once participants provided consent on the online form, they continued to an interview sign-up page where they could provide their general daily availability, time zone, text or email preferences, and contact information for the investigator to reach out to them to schedule their interview. Once this form was submitted, the investigator received an electronic notification from Qualtrics that a new participant signed up for the interview study; in this way, participants were contacted as soon as possible (permitting their availability as indicated in the sign-up form) to prevent loss of interest or future scheduling conflicts. The investigator contacted each participant via text or email, based on their preferred contact method. Every point of contact with participants was used to establish rapport. Every participant who indicated interest moved forward to take part in the interview study; no participant dropped out between the sign-up, scheduling, and interview period.
At the start of the interview, the investigator provided an overview of what was involved in participating in the study, stating that the interview would take between 25-45 minutes and the conversation would begin with a reiteration of elements of the informed consent form that the participant virtually signed, time to answer any questions the participant may have after the informed consent is reviewed, a notification that the audio recording would begin, a review of measures taken to protect participant confidentiality, and then the interview would proceed with a set of questions in a semi-structured interview guide. The participant learned that, depending on their preference, they would receive a text or email with a $10 electronic Amazon gift card code to thank them for their time. Elements of the informed consent form described to participants included general topics covered during the interview, the expected time to complete the interview, and the voluntary nature of the interview questions (that is, the participant may skip any question they do not want to answer and may provide as much or as little information as they choose to provide). They then asked any questions they had about the interview study.

Once the investigator answered questions, the recording began, and the investigator proceeded to briefly review measures taken to protect participant confidentiality. Then, the investigator proceeded with the interview questions. No participant opted to skip questions or end the interview early. Interviews took an average of 39 minutes and 42 seconds (SD = 15 minutes, 36 seconds; range: 13 minutes, 33 seconds – 77 minutes, 45 seconds). Eleven interviews fell between 25-45 minutes. Only one interview took about 15 minutes, and two interviews went over one hour. At the end of the interview, the investigator thanked participants for their time and asked them if they had any questions about the study. Once the investigator answered any remaining questions, participants indicated how they would like to receive their $10 Amazon gift card code, and the investigator asked participants to share study sign-up
information with other eligible military personnel who may be interested in taking part in the study. Immediately after ending the call, the investigator sent participants their $10 Amazon gift card codes.

**Semi-Structured Interview Content**

In line with Moustakas’ (1994) approach to IPA research, the semi-structured interview protocol included broad, overarching questions (i.e., What is it like to be in the military while in a romantic relationship?) that focused on military, transition-specific, and LGBT-community related experiences and how those experiences affected their romantic relationships, and vice versa. Because the interview guide was semi-structured, the investigator used the interview protocol as a general guide, but asked follow-up questions and prompts when needed and kept the conversation flexible regarding topics the participant brought up. For example, though the interview guide did not include items on family planning, few participants chose to discuss this topic and the investigator probed that conversation to comprehensively understand participants’ experiences. The interview guide had items on military community connectedness, as well, to explore the importance of other ostensibly salient communities for service members and their families.

Next, an expansive list of open-ended questions was asked to obtain detailed, in-depth information. Once the interview officially began, participants were asked “How old are you?” and “What is your gender and sexual identity?” to get to know participants’ personal identities and characteristics. Next, participants answered questions about their military service, including their branch of service and their rank. Following this, participants proceeded to answer questions about characteristics of their romantic relationship. Romantic relationship characteristics gleaned for this study included how the participant met their partner, relationship length, and current
relationship status. Participants shared their romantic partner’s characteristics, as well, to include their partner’s gender identity and military history. Next, participants responded to a broad question, asking for a description of what it is like to be in the military while in a romantic relationship. The investigator prompted participants, when needed, about the challenges and benefits of being in a romantic relationship while in the military. Then, the investigator asked participants to share how their romantic relationship affected their commitment to military service and their military experiences. Next, participants responded to focused questions based on whether they deployed or PCS’d. If participants experienced at least one deployment and one PCS, they were asked to focus on the transition experience they felt was most impactful on their romantic relationship. Participants shared information about how their transition affected their romantic relationship, and vice versa. Participants were prompted about both the positive and negative impacts of their transition on their romantic relationship, when necessary.

Then, the investigator asked participants to think about the communities in which they belong, and whether their experiences in those communities are linked to their romantic relationship. Participants responded to two sets of community-focused questions: one on the LGBT community, and one section on the military community. Participants reflected on what these communities looked like to them, their personal relationships with each community, whether they felt a sense of belongingness in each community, and how community connectedness affected their experiences as service members or their romantic relationships. Next, the investigator asked active duty participants if their romantic relationship impacted whether they would like to stay in the military beyond their contractual obligation. The investigator asked veteran participants to reflect on whether their romantic relationship affected their decision to leave the military. To conclude the interview, the investigator asked participants
if there was anything else they felt should have been discussed regarding their experiences in a romantic relationship while on duty, and if there was anything else about their military service and romantic relationship that they would like to share. For a complete draft of the Study 2 interview guide, see Appendix H.

Data Processing

Audio recordings were transcribed in Word by the investigator. Transcription took place immediately after the end of each interview. Any identifying information provided by participants in the recording was left out of the transcription. Identifying information included any names accidentally shared by participants during the recording, and specific duty station locations or deployment regions. Aside from identifying information, all other interview content was transcribed verbatim. All data were organized following transcription, with initial screening procedures conducted using Excel. Once a codebook was developed, data were imported into NVivo 12 (Jackson & Bazeley, 2019).

Codebook Development

An incremental stepwise process was followed, where data were analyzed (i.e., “taking things apart;” Saldana, 2021, p. 6) inductively during first-round (i.e., initial) coding, and then synthesized (i.e., “putting things together into new assemblages of meaning;” Saldana, 2021, p.6) in the second-round coding (see also Saldana & Omasta, 2018, for a description of this process). First, following transcription, analytic memos were developed followed by open thematic coding of responses in Excel to disassemble the data analytically and systematically (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this step, responses were broken down into meaningful phrases or thought units using cyclical, continuous interactions among data collected and subsequent descriptions and interpretations until meaning structures were achieved (Ricoeur, 1986). Given the ontological
nature of the research question, seeking a description of the lived experiences of sexual minority service members in same-gender romantic relationships, the analytic approach necessitates an exploration of interpretive meanings within the data and utilizing particular coding methods that best reflect those experiences. That said, an in-vivo coding scheme was used to honor participants’ voices and reveal concepts most salient in these data (Saldana, 2021; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During this initial coding process, 181 codes were identified across four general overarching topics, including romantic relationship growth and maintenance, transition-related experiences, community connectedness and community-related experiences, and military commitment. Codes were distilled over the second-round coding process. The transcripts were re-read to conceptually combine, sort, and categorize in-vivo codes. Re-reading and re-assessing qualitative data are common methods used to increase familiarity with interview content and to begin to piece apart salient themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

This process continued until a final set of five overarching themes emerged that effectively encapsulated the data. Then, a codebook was developed in NVivo. The codebook included names and descriptions for each theme revealed during the initial and secondary coding phases. Data were coded in NVivo according to the thematic structure defined by the codebook. Though multiple coders were not involved in this project, precluding the use of intercoder agreement to address reliability, a PhD-level colleague with expertise in LGBT research was identified as a consultant to conduct a peer-review/debriefing process to provide an external check. Specifically, this colleague’s role was to play “devil’s advocate” to “keep the researcher honest, and to ask hard questions about methods, meanings, and interpretations” (Creswell, 2013; p.231). This conversation took place after the codebook was generated. The discussion included a review of the codes and illustrative text and took approximately two hours to complete. The
discussion included suggestions for finalizing the names of each theme and branched into a broader conversation about the overarching “take-home” message from the themes gleaned from data analysis. Following this, three iterative drafts of themes were produced to generate a final set of themes and subthemes describing the essence of participant experiences, and a final codebook was assembled (see Appendix I). All interview data were coded using the final codebook, grouping coded data into the thematic framework. Data were reviewed six additional times to make any necessary coding adjustments and as a coding re-check. Then, all coded data were printed to a hard copy document. The hard document was reviewed a seventh time as another re-check and to glean illustrative quotes to accompany analytic interpretations of each theme described in the results section below.

Strategies offered by Sousa (2014), Groenewald (2004), Patton (1980; 1990), and Creswell (2013) were used to promote the credibility, objectivity, and validity of this qualitative study. Providing a reflexivity statement on the researcher’s behalf establishes the position of the researcher (Merriam, 1988; Sousa, 2014; Stiles, 1993). Furthermore, reflexivity statements are identified as one of the key points in the Joanna Briggs Institute Critical Appraisal Tool, which is used as a quality assessment guide for synthesizing qualitative research (Aromataris & Munn, 2020). The reflexivity statement for this study can be found in Appendix J.

Validity checks were conducted by summarizing interview responses with analytic memos and checking in with participants during the interview to ensure data had been correctly captured (Groenwald, 2004; Hycner et al., 1999). When necessary, the investigator paraphrased participant responses as a re-check to ensure the investigator correctly understood what was being shared. In addition, negative case analyses were explored to consider disconfirming evidence emerging from the data (Patton, 1980; 1990). For example, with respect to transition-
related stress, and though most participants shared negative effects of stress on romantic relationships, a subset of coded text described post-transition growth and other positive effects of military transitions on their romantic relationships. These cases were identified and discussed as contrary cases in light of the broader themes (see Results section). Finally, a description of themes emerging from lived experiences of being in a romantic relationship while on active duty was developed (Creswell, 2013) and presented in the results section below.

**Results**

Five overarching themes and one subtheme were extracted from the interview data with 230 references (i.e., pieces of interview text) coded across themes. Themes of *Relationship Strain and Career Progression; Stress Spillover; Minority Stress; LGBT Visibility and Acceptance in the Military, and Establishing Connections;* and *Relationship Dynamics and Growth* encapsulated the lived experiences of active duty military personnel in same-gender romantic relationships who participated in this study. *Family Planning* emerged as a subtheme under *LGBT Visibility and Acceptance in the Military, and Establishing Connections.* Pseudonyms are used with each illustration to protect the confidentiality of participants included in this study, and a selection of illustrations from each participant in the study are presented. Of note, while all participants were in romantic relationships during study participation, some participants discussed experiences with prior relationships that were salient to them during the interview. Those illustrations will still be presented, given the importance of those experiences for the participants and the relevance to the extracted themes. In addition, specific details in illustrations (e.g., unique military or relationship challenges, or specific career titles) that may otherwise risk the confidentiality of participants were spared and replaced with vague information (see Appendix K for specific transcription notation).
**Relationship Strain and Career Progression**

The most striking theme across the interviews encapsulated the strain of military experiences (i.e., transitions, day-to-day experiences) on romantic relationships and the recursive nature of the link between military commitment and romantic relationship quality. All 14 participants described how their romantic relationship shapes their commitment to military services, with 58 references coded to this theme. One poignant illustration from Sandy sets the stage, exemplifying the tension between romantic relationships and military careers. Sandy (U.S. Navy) explained: “Sometimes you have to choose. You either want to be extremely successful in your career or you want to be in a healthy happy relationship. Very seldomly do I see both. It happens, but not very often.” Some participants were straightforward about the military needing to come first before other family-related obligations. For example, when describing what it’s like, generally, to be in a romantic relationship while in the military, Tina stated:

> It can be challenging, I think, due to the nature of the job where you have to move around a lot… and there's not a lot of predictability. You ask a lot of your partner, and it puts a lot on your relationship to have to be flexible, because the Navy will always want to come first. (Tina, U.S. Navy)

That the military takes priority necessitates romantic relationships coming second. For Lisa, her partner’s career had to come second to her own career progression. She shared:

> Sometimes, I’ve questioned whether or not I can continue. I want to finish 20 years, that’s always been my goal. It’s been my goal since I started, and my wife has known that…But there are times when I’m like, holy shit…I don’t know, because it’s *her* life and *her* career that have suffered because of it. (Lisa, U.S. Navy)
Like Lisa, many participants agreed that their partner’s goals caused some re-thinking around whether the military is a sustainable career option. John commented on the turmoil around his decision to commit to military service in light of his (former) partner’s needs. John described his experience shifting from committing to a 20-year military career stemming from previous experiences in his relationship with his former husband:

I knew coming in when I first joined, I wanted to do 20 years. I was set. I wasn’t going to get married, wasn’t going to talk to anybody romantically...that changed when I met my ex-husband. Instead of me deciding what I wanted to do next...I had to take into consideration what they might want for both of us and mostly for my career... I had to take [ex-husband’s perspective] into account. Sometimes it felt like a strain of like...I really want to do this, but this other option is probably what's best for both of us. That's probably the bigger challenge of progressing in the Navy or in the military and trying to set yourself apart from other people you are competing with for rank and trying to diverse your career sometimes. It's hard when you have to take into account what their needs are if there are certain places, they might not be able to go to for certain reasons because of their job type for instance or what they do (John, U.S. Navy).

For John, the conflict between managing his partner’s needs and distinguishing himself in his military career to continue ascending in rank was described as a particularly prominent challenge. His ex-husband’s ability to find work in new duty stations or have other needs that do not align with military life needed to be considered when deciding the next steps to take in his career. This theme is especially relevant here, given that duty station choices may facilitate or inhibit faster promotions for service members or other opportunities to support career
progression. That said, John communicated that he decided what was best for his relationship rather than only for himself. Tina clarified that her partner’s willingness to continue with a military lifestyle would essentially dictate whether she would continue with her military career or find another opportunity in the civilian sector once her contract ends. That is, whether she remains in the military is no longer a unilateral decision. When asked about how, if at all, her romantic relationship affects her commitment to the military, Tina shared:

Yes and no, I think, because I’m still committed to the military…but if at any time my spouse said, ‘I can’t do this anymore,’ then I would listen to what she had to say. While I’m currently bound by contract, I’d have to say, ‘This contract is going to ride out until this point and I need you to stick with me until then.’ If that wasn’t the case, you know, single me might say ‘Oh, I’ll just ride out as many years as I want,’ and maybe I’d take different duty stations or make different choices in that way. But now, it’s like, if my wife didn’t want to continue with this military life then I would…I would let go and I would walk away. At this point, now, it’s not my decision anymore. It’s our decision. (Tina, U.S. Navy).

Lacey had a similar experience, though her wife’s input re-directed her career while in military service.

My wife said ‘I don't want to be a stay-at-home mom, and I don't want to be a single mom. I really want you to be there for our kids and so if you really want to have kids then you might need to...we might need you to change careers if that's an option or potentially get out.’ That kind of was just a refocusing time because I thought, well, I could do other things in [specific occupation] in the Navy, or I can
Lacey made a lateral change in her occupation after realizing the stress of her current job on her spouse. In her prior position, Lacey was subjected to more frequent deployments and general uncertainty about when she would be home with her family. In this way, she created a career path for herself and her family that permitted her to spend more time at home with fewer uncertainties. Janine shifted her military career goals, as well, as a function of her romantic relationship. In this way, she prioritized protecting her relationship from hardships or strain. Janine transitioned from working in a specific career field that required her to be away from her family for overseas missions to a career that permitted her to spend more time at home.

There was a point where I made changes to how I served in the military so I could allow myself to have a family, and be in an easier relationship, and not put as much hardship on my relationship. Now that I started a family, I couldn’t potentially look at going overseas or doing so many deployments and things like that, so I do make some decisions based on [family]. I found a position that gives me more control, specifically to benefit my family. (Janine, Air Force)

Brian and Helena, both recent veterans, shared how their experiences in the military were not conducive to maintaining the family life they both envisioned. Brian placed a high value on physical closeness with his partner, which was challenging to uphold during deployments; “Just with the whole deployment…being away from my partner was really stressful, so I figured I might as well get out and, you know, make it work somewhere else. That way, we are both physically together.” (Brian, Navy). Helena, shared that her work
tempo did not leave her time to spend with her family, ultimately contributing to her
decision to leave the military.

Being in a relationship and then having kids, uh…you know, sadly, it was my
first duty station and I had to work crazy hours. [My wife] would bring me
dinner sometimes at work, so we had time to spend together…but when we
had kids, I really didn’t want to maintain that lifestyle. It became really clear
after the first child, I was like…I couldn’t find a way to balance work and
family in a way that was meaningful to me. And so, that’s why I got out.

(Helena, Air Force)

Importantly, though, not all participants felt as though their romantic relationship had any
impact on their military service. While Dave conceded that, due to his romantic relationship,
“Some decisions a little more difficult because I’m no longer just thinking about my military
career but how that might affect that other person,” when asked whether his romantic
relationship has any influence on whether he wants to stay in the military beyond his current
contractual obligation, he replied:

Nope. I have loved the Marine Corps since I joined. I was pretty certain with a
couple of months into the fleet - that's what they call it when you finish all of your
training and you get to your primary duty station, I’ve been pretty certain and
confident since then that I want to be a career Marine. (Dave, U.S. Marine Corps)

That being so, when it came to career decisions, Dave was clear that his romantic
relationship would have no bearing.

Thus far, illustrations of global decisions around career commitment and the effects of
romantic relationships on military service have been discussed. Conversely, several participants
elucidated the effects of their military service, to include transitions, on their relationships. 
Namely, how transitions or other military experiences contributed to relationship strain were discussed. For example, Brian described a previous relationship that completely dissolved due to a PCS and living long distance. “I will say I was in a past relationship where I got selected for orders elsewhere and they stayed back home and with the long distance after 6 months we decided it wouldn’t work.” (Brian, U.S. Navy) Brian also clarified the struggles around deployments and relationship maintenance. He continued: “With most relationships, the problem with active duty is the deployment period. That’s when you usually see it fall apart or stay together…it’s very hard with the lack of communication.” (Brian, U.S. Navy).

Deployments as a particularly substantial challenge for romantic relationships were echoed by some participants, and especially with respect to relationship maintenance. For instance, Dave shared difficulties around communication and deployment, but also shared that his inability to share aspects of work with his partner induced some relational stress:

It’s the distance and the work aspects that I couldn’t talk about, or deployments, things like that put strain on the relationship frequently. The deployment itself put us in a lot of positions where outside communication was completely cut off for large periods of time. We were completely cut off from the outside world. It put distance between us, but it’s part of the harsh reality of the job that you sign up for. We would always joke about if the Marine Corps wanted you to have a spouse or a boyfriend or girlfriend or what have you, they’d issue you one. (Dave, U.S. Marine Corps)

Participants revealed that the stress associated with transitions fluctuated with different parts of the deployment process. Pre-deployment workups involve preparing gear, ensuring
medical readiness, being up to date on training, and ensuring personal affairs are in order.

Following the deployment, post-deployment processes involve reintegrating the service member in their family unit after being away. Lacey deployed twice soon after her partner moved to join her in her new duty station, and she explained how pre-deployment was particularly difficult for her relationship.

It's not easy, I suppose. But it's worth it. I mean, at some point we are going to talk about deployments and being underway… but it's actually kind of hard before deployments. The workups that you go through, especially in the Navy, it's a lot of time underway but it's like time underway when you're incredibly busy. You are barely able to talk to anybody and you don't have the phone set up as you do on deployment so it's just email. So, I think that was our hardest time… That was like a hard transition for everybody and their families. It was especially hard for me because [wife’s name] lived in [EASTERN STATE] so even in port when I was working long hours it was very hard because the time difference was just like...pretty hard to work around. When she moved to [DUTY LOCATION] it was different. We lived together and she knew when I was gone, but it wasn't necessarily easier - it was hard in a different way because she up and moved and had almost no friends there when I deployed the first time. (Lacey, Navy)

For Lacey and her wife, deployment was challenging in a different way from pre-deployment workups because her wife was acclimating to a new place on her own without an established social support system. Periods of time after deployments bring a separate set of challenges. For instance, Janine (U.S. Air Force) shared her experiences with reintegration stress, mentioning temporary duty travel (TDY) as one example preceding reintegration. “Well, we
talked a little bit about trips, TDYs, and things like that. When we go on these trips… coming home, you always have this re-forming you have to do. Figuring out your roles in your relationship is stressful.” Helena echoed the strain around re-integration, describing what it was like for her immediately before and after returning from a temporary duty assignment or temporary travel.

Whenever I would leave for PCS or TDY and we would reunite, that would always be a point of contention and frustration in our relationships. We realized later on… I don't know what it was, but it was a thing that would happen for us at least before I PCS’d and before I’d go TDY, we would end up in some type of argument or another…Eventually, we realized that was the case so we went to couples therapy, a couple times throughout to help us work through some of those things, um and then eventually realized ok we need a different routine or pattern obviously because…it’s just kind of what happens like before we would separate or when we would reunite. (Helena, U.S. Air Force)

In addition to romantic relationships, military transitions seemed to affect partner wellbeing. Often, service members miss important milestones or family events during deployments or time away for other types of transitions. Lisa, John, and Tina described how PCS’s impacted their partners.

When I PCS’d from my 1st to 2nd duty station my wife’s family member passed away. My wife and I weren’t married at the time, we were still dating, and I was not given the opportunity to go to his funeral…that is a massive point of
contention with my wife. That I haven’t been able to be there for significant events, especially that one. (Lisa, U.S. Navy)

[My ex-husband] was set in one city for 10-15 years, changing that had a big like emotional impact on him. When we moved to [SOUTHERN STATE], his whole demeanor changed. He moved away from all his family. I saw the impact it had on him. (John, U.S. Navy)

I was in training for several hours a day, my wife was also working full time and in school so there was a lot of stress. She didn’t know anybody and felt pretty isolated, and left everybody at home to move across the country with me. (Tina, Navy)

Thus, military experiences seemed to induce strain on romantic relationships more broadly but also caused distress for relationship partners more specifically. Furthermore, a pattern of recursive effects between relationship quality and career commitment developed. Romantic partners perspectives shaped service members’ commitment beyond contractual obligations, but career commitment was also implicated in the dissolution of prior relationships or strain on current relationships.

Stress Spillover

For many participants, stress experienced by one romantic partner at work in turn impacted their romantic relationship, a process characterized as “stress spillover” (Bodenmann et al., 2007). Stress spillover was discussed by 79% of participants (n = 11), with 26 references coded to this theme. The phenomenon of stress pouring from work life to home life and vice versa is described by Dave.
With Marines up to this point you have three types of people. People who can completely separate their personal life and work life…they don’t let them mix and they are really good about not letting one affect the other. Then, you have the people who have a healthy balance of the two and one will generally positively influence the other. And then, you have the third type who are completely toxic. They have no idea how to maturely balance a personal life and a work life. Often times they will take out work frustrations out on significant other, or they will let their home frustrations pour over into work and they will take their home frustrations out on the service members around them. (Dave, U.S. Marine Corps)

Stress spillover was described by four participants concerning their command climate or leadership. In this way, stress spillover is heightened by poor command climate or leadership affecting their personal life (and romantic relationships). In addition, “home” was discussed as a place of respite from stressors at work, suggesting an attempt at creating psychological distance to minimize the effects of work stress and to minimize the influence of work stressors on romantic relationships. For example, Chloe states:

If your work climate is shitty, then your only relief is at home. But if you can’t handle or separate the two then you are taking the stress home and that creates stress at home, and you have nowhere to go to decompress yourself, so you are stuck in a constant tumble. (Chloe, U.S. Navy)

Chloe described the inability to compartmentalize stress from home and stress at work as contributing to a “constant tumble.” For some participants, other military personnel may exacerbate stressors. The effects of leadership were one salient feature of work life described by
participants as “detrimental” or contributing to service members’ inability to create balance. In one such example, John describes the effects of leadership on his relationship.

So some duty stations I've had, leadership at my specific command has been detrimental to my personal life, and you definitely bring it home. You feel the impact of trying to deal with the crap at work and then bringing it home, but trying to be positive when it's still in your mind at work. Like, not really getting anywhere at work and then trying to bring it home to explain it like why you're upset and that person doesn't really get it because they're not in the same environment as you (John, U.S. Navy).

Dave clarified the impact of leadership on service members’ personal relationships. Specifically, he pointed out that military careers are temporary, and that military leaders have the power to hurt or help service members maintain their relationships.

The biggest mistake that people make is that they don’t know how to balance their personal and work relationship…That comes down to toxic leadership that forgets service members, before they were service members, are human beings and they will go back to their personal lives when they get out. And 100% of servicemembers will get out of the service and leadership fails to remember that one crucial fact that these people have a relationship that will exist either before, during, or after the service member’s time in service and there's no true balance between the two and that's where most relationships fail. (Dave, U.S. Marine Corps)

Janine described the strain on her romantic relationship caused by not feeling supported by her command, with the added pressure to be a top performer.
It definitely adds stress because you want to be able to do well in your work but if you don’t have the support there to do well in your family, too, that puts strain on your relationship. Strain because you’re trying to juggle both things (Janine, U.S. Air Force).

After his Permanent Change of Station (PCS), John recognized that concern over his partner influenced his ability to focus on his new job at his new duty station. He describes that experience and his positive interactions with leadership who sensed there was an issue and offered resolutions to support. This perspective is demonstrative of stress spillover in a different direction – in this case, John’s concern for his partner at home impacted his ability to stay focused at work.

I know the first 2-3 months when I was at the new duty station I had always had in the back of my head like how is he doing, how is he doing with work how is he feeling, I know probably devoted more time devoted to him than to focusing on learning my new job so I had leadership that like identified that like ‘If you guys both need help, there are resources in the Navy, if you need help there are resources,’ so it was a matter of focusing on myself but still having to focus on him to make sure he was ok and still get the job done (John, U.S. Navy).

Though the concept of stress spillover was discussed in light of negative experiences by many participants, some participants staunchly exclaimed that they were not affected by stress spillover. For example, Sarah (active U.S. Army, National Guard), who is in a dual-military relationship, explained, “We are very work orientated when we know we have to turn on and off our personal life…we are good at that.” Rebecca, in a dual-military relationship with Amy, described similar experiences in her romantic relationship:
I think that in my relationship we are pretty good about talking about our day and what happened as soon as we get home, but we spend the rest of the night talking about us like we try to leave work at work. (Rebecca, U.S. Navy)

Dave felt the same, noting that even though he can successfully separate work stress from home stress and vice versa, he would still share his experiences with his romantic partner or confide in colleagues at work about challenges he may face at home.

I keep a very firm distinct separation from the two. It ensures that if I’m mad at someone in my leadership, I don’t come home and take that out on my significant other. Or, if I have a disagreement with my significant other, I don’t go to work the next day frustrated and take it out on my junior Marines. I’m really good at keeping...and that’s not saying that I won’t talk to my significant other about things that frustrate me at work, or I won’t talk to someone at work that I’m close with about things that frustrate me at home, but I don’t let them affect either relationship or aspect. (Dave, U.S. Marine Corps)

All told, some participants identified concepts of stress spillover as a real experience and issue for their relationship life and work life. In contrast, others did not let it affect them in either way.

**Minority Stress**

Seven participants reported stressors, both related to sexual minority status and other characteristics like gender and race. Twenty-four references were coded to this theme. Experiences of concealment, discrimination, and heterosexism were all discussed with respect to interpersonal experiences during military service. Chloe, Sandy, and Sarah described experiences around concealing their sexual identity or feeling fear around sharing their sexual identity at
work. Chloe struggled with a fear of being out as a sexual minority person, and how being out may lead to consequences for her career.

I couldn't really open myself to other military members because I wasn't sure what their views were. It was very isolating. Even after the repeal of DADT, I think there's still a fear of being out and open, especially in uniform, or maybe that's just something I feel. Everyone says they have an open door policy, but as soon as you say the one wrong thing to someone who doesn't agree with your lifestyle…your career could be in jeopardy. (Chloe, U.S. Navy)

Sandy recognized negative attitudes towards women serving in the military are ever-present, and, given that she is both a woman and a sexual minority, she had to work harder than her male (and perhaps also heterosexual) counterparts. Uncertainty about how new units will accept her contributed to her hesitancy around sharing her sexual identity.

When I PCS or when I change units, I am very hesitant to share that I'm a lesbian, because there are still a lot of people who don’t even believe that women should be in the Army which is a challenge by itself. Like, I have to work twice as hard to get the same promotion that the dirtbag dude next to me just got. That person’s beliefs can affect me even though there are regulations that say reprisal is against the rules. (Sandy, U.S. Army)

Vanessa felt similarly to Sandy and described her thoughts around sexism in the military and having to work harder than male service members.

Being a female in the military is very difficult. If you are a female, and I feel like being a female in the civilian world itself is difficult, so you know being in the military…you have to try harder. You have to be better. You have to speak
differently to be taken seriously…In the military, you are either a bitch or a slut. A slut is just someone who is friendly… just a female who is friendly and nice to people. That makes you a slut. Being a bitch which is what I would much rather be, and I would say that’s what I’m labeled as...as someone who speaks up for themselves, speaks up for their soldiers, defends their soldiers, defends themselves. (Vanessa, U.S. Army, National Guard)

Sarah, a participant in a dual-military relationship, described stressors associated with having multiple minority identities. She shared feelings of mistrust and concern over being thought of differently due to her racial, gender, and sexual identities.

We don’t really trust anyone around us. I am very private with my life in the military, I like to keep personal and work different. It's about everything. It's about being two females in the military, being a Mexican in the military, being gay in the military, all the little things that you don't want people to think differently about you because of those things. We try to keep it very vague.

(Sarah, U.S. Army, National Guard)

Sandy shared that her romantic relationship was not considered as valid as heterosexual relationships, higher-ranking individuals mistreated her.

My relationships get downplayed often. Like, they're not real relationships because we are two females. I’ve had a male hitting on me and I'm like ‘No, thank you, we play for the same team,’ and then they respond and say ‘Well, you haven't had the right guy yet,’ and some of these people outrank me by a lot.

(Sandy, Army)
Lisa also shared the scrutiny from other service members asking her for personal details about her relationship.

That’s when I experienced the greatest amount of discrimination was at that first duty station, so it was compounded by a lot of other things that happened. That’s the tip of the iceberg. I had random people ask me on the first day, ‘how do you have sex? Who’s the guy?’…They had a problem with the fact that I wouldn’t flirt with them. (Lisa, Navy)

Aside from personal relationships, participants described how their relationships with other service members were questioned because of their sexual identities. Lacey provided an example of this.

I've definitely experienced some amount of bias, because at one point my chief came to me and was like, ‘Hey, you shouldn't be having lunch with that Sailor’ and I was like ‘Why?’ and he said it’s because this other chief thinks you are fraternizing with this Sailor. And I was like…‘Why?’ There are plenty of male officers having lunch with male enlisted. Both parties happen to be straight, but that wasn't the problem. The problem was, my Sailor and I were both lesbians. That was viewed as fraternizing, because I was getting too close to this sailor, and the chief assumed I was going to cross the line. (Lacey, U.S. Navy)

Lacey’s interaction with her Sailor, however benign, was called out and scrutinized because they were both sexual minority women. Lacey contrasted this to heterosexual male officers spending time with enlisted Sailors; their interactions were not dissected or questioned in the same way. Lisa shared her feelings about the repeal of the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA; H.R.3396), and how other service members reacted to the change in policy.
There were so many days with so many comments that were so inappropriate, and then when DOMA got repealed, people running around talking about getting ‘gay married,’ just the lack of consideration about the fact that up until that point I did not have any of the same rights as the people in that building. The overwhelming amount of transphobia that poured out of these people. I got to the point where I was sitting in an office, and I just didn’t want to be at work anymore. I was so overwhelmingly depressed by the transphobic and homophobic comments, and I got overwhelmed….Even though DOMA got repealed, the political climate heavily affects the stress on my marriage. When Trump was president, that was a scary time in my life. Now, trying to negotiate orders for next year, where do I go? These are things that my heterosexual counterparts don’t have to think about.

(Lisa, U.S. Navy)

**LGBT Visibility and Acceptance in the Military, and Establishing Connections**

Issues around LGBT visibility in the military and acceptance of LGBT people in the military or in military communities emerged as a salient theme. They were discussed by 12 participants, with 48 coded references. This topic naturally emerged primarily with regards to feelings of safety and security in geographical changes or simply as a function of being a sexual minority person in the military. For some participants, being a part of the LGBT community and being out as an LGBT person in the military helped facilitate representation and helped expose service members who have never met an LGBT person before to the community. In this way, they helped change the minds of people who may stereotype LGBT community members. When asked about what it is like to be a sexual minority person in the military, Tina shared:
There’s positive things as far as…there’s been more…representation of LGBT in the military as of late. Also, being that I identify in that community, I’m also able to talk…like, speak to those individuals and positively affect the lives of those individuals as well as people who do not identify with those communities. People who maybe are just ignorant to what…maybe they’ve never met an LGBT person in their life because there are those people in the military, for sure, and so introducing this community to those people and saying, ‘Hey, we are people just like you,’ and kind of helping to break down stereotypes and misconceptions. It’s a positive thing (Tina, U.S. Navy).

Dave shared a similar experience, such that he could change the minds of other military personnel. Dave explained:

I had a gunnery sergeant who is extremely conservative, and who has never been around with anyone from the community, and who was very averse to it. The thought of [the LGBT community] made him uncomfortable, and at the end of the deployment he pulled me aside and talked to me about it, and said ‘Hey, I just want to let you know that I appreciate who you are, and you have changed the way that I see this side of …of people. I’ve always thought it to be wrong and this was my perspective, but you have really opened my eyes and I want to let you know that I appreciate that. (Dave, U.S. Marine Corps)

Other participants, like Lacey, generally agreed with Dave – sharing that the military community is open and does not have a problem with LGBT people. She qualified this perspective, though, with compulsion on the part of the military to be welcoming to LGBT people.
I'd say the military community is pretty open. Because they have to be…even if they don't religiously view being a lesbian as a thing that they...deal with...they do in a professional sense. And, I am friends with a lot of fairly religious people and they don't seem to have a problem with it. It gives me hope for the future. (Lacey, U.S. Navy)

Vanessa shared that, though the military community may be generally okay serving alongside LGBT service members, there are different feelings about serving alongside sexual minority men and women.

People are mainly ok with it, to an extent, if you are a female that is a butch, I guess, and you act like a guy or you want to be like a guy. Like, you’re that masculine type or whatever, a lot of males are okay with that because they are like ‘Hey, they’re one of my bros.’ If you are a guy or a male and you are gay, they are kind of like oh you’re just a little bitch. (Vanessa, U.S. Army, National Guard)

When asked about his experiences as a sexual minority person in the military, John described his initial hesitance around being out as a gay person. Eventually, though, he found the military a welcoming place for LGBT people.

I definitely think it's been positive. I know growing up there was Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, and I joined the military after that, so I know being in I was kind of hesitant on…do I, like, let people know? Is it going to affect my job? Am I not going to get promoted for this? After being in the Navy, I think that the Navy is more open or the military itself is more open to LGBT service members than the civilian side is. And I feel like everyone is a lot more accepting of it, just because of how diverse the military actually is. (John, U.S. Navy)
Even so, John continued to discuss what it was like to PCS from a generally welcoming duty station location for LGBT people to a state that felt less accepting. John shared:

My first romantic relationship in the Navy was in [WESTERN STATE] and it just seemed like it was accepting right away. As soon as I saw two guys together walking down the street, I realized that's just the lifestyle. That’s just how it is in [WESTERN STATE]. Moving to [SOUTHERN STATE], it was a big change. With two men walking down the street together holding hands, you got more looks than you did in [WESTERN STATE]. Being from [SOUTHERN STATE], I know the stigma of the South is that they don't recognize or accept that lifestyle. Being from that same state and being in a relationship in the same state, growing up you see the difference from when you were a kid being told about it, to now, you are in that situation and it's hard to cope with it sometimes. This is how I am, this is who I want to be, but all these people are looking at me. It's learning to live with it and learning to be like ‘Well, they might not think its ok, but it is ok.’

(John, U.S. Navy)

The investigator followed up with John to ask what it was like to move to a less welcoming state while in a romantic relationship. To this, John replied:

I remember we had a talk about it when we were driving somewhere, and he brought it up. He said, ‘Do you think people look at us more here than when we were in [WESTERN STATE]?’ And I said, ‘Well, I think I’ve realized it, but I didn’t put thought to it.’ And he said ‘Yeah, I’ve felt like every time we go outside, people are looking at us because they can tell we are together. Is that not how it is, here?’ And I said, being from here, ‘It’s not something as openly
recognized as it would be in [WESTERN STATE] if you were to walk down the street together. In the bigger cities in [SOUTHERN STATE], it’s more acceptable just because those cities are a little bit more modern than smaller cities and all the ranches’, but I told him… ‘It's not a matter of not doing what we want to do or not being out together, it's just, it is what it is. We are happy together, and it shouldn't matter.’ (John, U.S. Navy)

It is not unlikely that, at some point in an LGBT service member’s career, they may be required to either serve at a duty station or deploy or attend training in a location that is not welcoming. Lisa voiced concerns over potentially being stationed somewhere unsafe or unwelcoming for her and her family. Notably, military members and their families have little to no say over where their next duty station will be, so Lisa provides an account of what could happen and the conversations she may need to have with the detailer coordinating her next duty station move.

My wife has never experienced discrimination, but we have both been in places like when I was stationed in [SOUTHERN STATE] and we were dating, we couldn’t hold hands in certain places. When the bathroom bill got passed, I had to be really careful when I was outside the city because it was a little scary.... and it was a significant amount of stress...I worry now because of everything going on in Texas and Florida, those are two places I can definitely get stationed. I have to have a serious convo with my detailer and say, ‘I will fail every fucking screening if you try and put me in one of those places because hell fucking no,’ and I have to think about that… about Southern states...there are places in the U.S. where I
am not comfortable getting stationed because of the political climate (Lisa, U.S. Navy).

However, Lisa was eager to share LGBT-specific resources offered to her and her family in one duty station. This resource seemed critical in helping her and her wife build a friend group that eventually influenced her family planning and provided much-needed insight. Her experience underscored how meaningful these resources may be and how effective they are in connecting people to the LGBT community in new duty stations.

I have friends that are queer, but I have more straight friends than I do not…which has always been super weird for me and my wife. You know, we’ve…I think both of us feel disconnected from the queer community because of the Navy. One of the few times we didn’t was when we were stationed in [Western state]. Fleet and Family Services runs an LGBT support group for active and retired and separated service members. That was awesome. Nowhere else have I seen that. It was so great because we got to meet other people in the community, and it actually hooked us up with people who guided the decisions we made about starting a family. It was cool because some of those people have become part of our chosen family. They show up at Thanksgiving every year no matter where we are at, we visit each other in different places, we established a kind of community…. There’s, I think both my wife and I feel disconnected because of the military sometimes because we move around… but in [Western state], we did not feel that way. There was so much you can do with military service and so much that was broadcasted for events for gay people in the military…it was pretty awesome (Lisa, U.S. Navy).
Seeking out closeness with the LGBT community or feeling welcomed as a sexual minority person was also discussed as an issue of safety. Amy, for example, described why she felt comfort around other LGBT people:

You never know who is not welcoming so it’s more comfortable in that setting instead of meeting…y’know, a straight couple that doesn’t view the same opinions as we do towards the community (Amy, U.S. Navy).

Amy continued to describe what it would be like to have a sense of LGBT community where she lives, and how living near areas with more LGBT people would have benefitted her romantic relationship.

I think it would be great, definitely, if we were living closer to areas that have a higher population of communities like that. I 100% see us going there and at least once or twice a month if we lived in that community… I think it would be good for us… In a social setting, we don’t get out much, so I think meeting new people and maybe having friends of our own instead of as a couple. I think it would help our relationship. (Amy, U.S. Navy)

Janine shared feeling a sense of home and comfort living in places where she can safely hold her wife’s hand.

I live in a city that is very open and I feel like I can walk around and see so many families and I never felt so at home. I don't know everybody there, but I do feel very at home, and I haven't always found that. I have lived in places where I wouldn't feel comfortable holding my spouses’ hand. I think that's where, and it’s probably a big transition in my life right now too, because I live in a place right
now that is so accepting, and I'm not necessarily scared of that. (Janine, U.S. Air Force)

Chloe hesitated to share her sexual identity, as well, until she felt comfortable or saw signals that reassured her. Moreover, she used these signals to foster engagement with community members and building friendships.

I'm a very paranoid person to begin with, so I keep everyone at bay unless I'm in an environment like a soccer game where everyone is there and there's so many different kind of families. Then, I feel like I can finally relax. But I feel like, even in uniform or even in a Podunk town, I'm very shut off…but if we see a flag somewhere, we think... ‘Oh! let's go make friends!’ We are in a really progressive state, but the town we are in is in between cities so there are more conservative people. (Chloe, U.S. Navy)

For Lisa, Amy, Janine, and Chloe, being near the LGBT community offered comfort and opportunities to connect with others and build friendships. Dave, however, did not seem to find comfort in the LGBT community. Dave struggled with feeling accepted within the LGBT community and with his own acceptance of the LGBT community. When asked about his relationship with the LGBT community, he shared:

I avoid it at all costs. I stay away from the toxicity of the LGBT+ community. I don’t have any appreciation for the voice and the movement that it’s turned into. It, particularly gay culture as it applies to me, it has hit the extreme in what we call hookup culture. Everybody knows everybody and everybody has just about slept with everybody…On top of it, it’s the movement of the LGBT community and what it now stands for. It’s very much in your face, and forces it down your
throat, and everything is offensive, and if you disagree with somebody you are somehow...you can be gay and openly proudly gay and disagree with something the LGBT community says, and suddenly, you are a racist sexist fascist bigot of some form or another because you think differently. It’s become a very oppressive movement. it now suppresses free thought, critical thinking, openly free speech, different perspectives and points of view...there’s no longer a discussion and community if you don’t fit this crystal clear picture of what the current movement thinks it means to be lesbian, gay, straight, transgender, bisexual, whatever label you put on it. If you don’t fit this persona, then somehow you don’t belong… even though you do. (Dave, U.S. Marine Corps)

Dave was passionate in his responses about whether he felt connected to the LGBT community and his perspectives on LGBT community. He found it difficult to identify with a community that he felt was critical and unwelcoming of different perspectives.

**Family Planning.** One unexpected subtheme related to family planning, and struggling to find support or acceptance as a same-gender couple trying to grow their family. Four participants brought up family planning and the struggle to sustain support from the military. Lisa shared:

We do not get nearly enough support when it comes to having kids. When my wife has a child, I don’t know if I’m going to get daddy leave because I’m not the parent having the child. Like, I don’t think i qualify for baby leave. I think there is a decent difference between gay and straight couples because of the support you’re looking at. They don’t have verbiage for two dads when you get a baby for
the first time, and that’s concerning because that makes me also feel like the Navy is not supportive of me having a family. (Lisa, U.S. Navy)

Janine and Helena shared their concern over support for same-gender families as well. Both describe overarching challenges with family planning, and Helena continues to clarify added difficulties faced by gay men who plan on having children.

I think, broadly, obviously there are challenges for relationships in the military. I do see where there are challenges for same-sex couples for fertility. We recently when through fertility treatments and the military is dipping their toes on support there in different ways… so we haven't gotten quite that far. Even among infertile women, uh whether they are in a same-sex relationship or not, there are challenges there. Our units have been very helpful and supportive to us so even they may work in the grey a little bit because they know our story, other units may not do that. I’d say there is a challenge when starting a family, and also, being a woman in the military and starting a family later in life because you're career focused is another thing. So, I’d say that is the biggest challenge, figuring out how to manage a family and a career would be a challenge and navigating those waters. (Janine, U.S. Air Force)

That's another thing. Having kids and family planning is difficult. Gay men have other obstacles...it’s easier for lesbians, apparently. I didn't realize that until we went to the orientation. Because they'll cover it for me or my wife, but when surrogacy comes into play, they don't cover any of it. So, for gay men, there is no support for any options. We didn't have to wait 6 months to a year like heterosexuals do [to try to become pregnant] because obviously we can’t do that,
so we got a straight referral. That was a great perk in some ways. Once I figured it out and went through it, I was like…anybody who has questions, ask away! I had a few friends who would reach out and I'm a super open book so i would walk them through what I learned and how I could support as a military member - what is covered and what is not, how to navigate the medical system as a queer person. People helped me, too, it was like a pay it forward kind of thing. (Helena, U.S. Air Force)

Lacey discussed her desire to connect with other sexual minority families and echoed Helena’s perspective that gay men have added obstacles to family planning.

It’s always nice to see another lesbian couple with a baby or a gay couple with a baby. I don't know a single gay couple with a baby, so. That would be a unicorn to find that in the military. I don't know, I think the access for gay men is harder than for lesbians. For me, we picked a donor, I got pregnant, and we had a baby. But for gay men, depending on how they want to do it, adoption is pretty difficult in the military because we move so much so we are deemed as less stable for kids. Even if you stayed in one spot, you'd still have to get picked. A lot of adoption agencies are religious-based, and the supreme court is siding with religious people over what they can and cannot do, so, at one point I was like ‘Oh, I would love to adopt,’ but very quickly we were like ‘nope.’ We are immediately going to be pushed out of that because we are lesbians. For a gay man to have a baby, the access there is just...it's just not there. It's incredibly expensive to have a surrogate, and none of that is covered by Tricare. fertility in general is not super
covered by Tricare. Having that access to a gay man who had a baby, that would be a unicorn. (Lacey, Navy)

Issues around family planning were salient to several interview participants, and participants speculated that gay men would have an even tougher time navigating family planning resources or even starting a family in general in the military. In addition, finding other sexual minority families seemed essential to participants concerning building community and social support.

**Relationship Dynamics and Growth**

Relationship dynamics and interpersonal growth were discussed by 12 participants, with 69 references coded to this theme. Even though military life generally adds strain to romantic relationships, unique military experiences may also offer opportunities for growth through novel experiences. The military may provide opportunities for growth. For example, travelling together or going through cross-country moves as a couple strengthened bonds with romantic relationship partners for some participants.

We lived abroad, we traveled, we really got to see a lot of things and we never had to worry about finances. We were able to save a good amount so that really set us up in a lot of ways for experiences and then, too. It just deepened our connection, you know, being able to travel and see the world… I feel like it was...it was just, you know, experiencing the whole country was pretty phenomenal for both of us. It was something we both really cared about. That definitely helped our family, not having to worry, and setting us up well for the future. (Helena, U.S. Air Force).
Helena continued to share relationship maintenance strategies she used to remain emotionally connected to their significant others, even when separated by physical distance. Every TDY, I would send her a post card and that was kinda fun. In the beginning of the relationship, I traveled quite a bit, so we found ways to make that pretty special. Especially with my wife's personality type, doing a postcard is a little different than calling just to say ‘Hi’…it is more memorable. So doing things like that, um, we have found ways to make a harder time easier and more enjoyable even. Every once in a while, there is a certain TV series we are watching and we’d make sure to do it at the same time… things like that. We are not necessarily the type to FaceTime all day long or anything like that, but we will send pictures from different things that we are able to and reconvene and talk about our day every once in a while. (Helena, U.S. Air Force)

Like Helena, even at great physical distance, Sandy found ways to promote emotional closeness with her partner.

It went as great as it can go being as far away from each other… we found ways to…we had a virtual date night and that stuff. We promised to make our relationship work, despite us being so far away, and it just felt like I had a support system even though I'm here alone. It was as simple as, if I had a crap day and I need to just vent, or we would fall asleep Face Timing…it was stupid cheesy stuff (Sandy, U.S. Army).

Moving together, though not unique to military life, was a good first-time experience together as a couple for Lacey and her wife. This theme was described as a positive “uptick” for her romantic relationship.
Moving together for the first time was like really nice and this has been a great tour as far as family time has gone. That PCS was…it was stressful, but it was like good to have something to do together like moving together for the first time. So, I would say that was a pretty good uptick I suppose (Lacey, U.S. Navy).

Tina described the period after returning from serving overseas and away from her spouse as “reinvigorating” for her relationship. She shared what it was like for her and her wife to reconnect after years apart and move to Tina’s next duty station together.

We got to come back together and become close and connected again. I also think that we both, academically and career-wise, both did a lot of work that was positive in both those aspects. It’s something that, you know, we both pushed each other together to motivate each other and I think that was a good thing. That was a positive (Tina, U.S. Navy).

In John’s experience, being in a relationship with a civilian facilitated sharing perspectives to broaden or improve thoughts about the military and what it was like to be an adult in the civilian world.

I have definitely been able to show my ex-husband and my boyfriend now, that are both civilians, that the military is more than what you see in the movies. It's more than the commercials… it's like a business. We do outreach events, community service, we travel, we do humanitarian missions, we do a lot of morale events for our command and for our people… because without the servicemembers there isn't a military. I think I’ve opened their eyes to what we do and they've opened my eyes to being an adult in the civilian world. (John, U.S. Navy)
All told, military personnel revealed positive effects of service on their romantic relationships and circumstances that promoted relationship wellbeing and relational growth.

**Discussion**

Study 2 elucidated lived experiences of same-gender romantic relationships against the backdrop of the military milieu via one-on-one interviews with service members in same-gender romantic relationships. This study revealed patterns underpinning associations between romantic relationship quality and military-specific experiences and, ultimately, what influences service members’ decisions to commit to the military. The objective of Study 2 was to understand nuances between military life and romantic relationships among service members in same-gender couples to better understand the role romantic relationships play in military commitment, and how community connections impact these relationships.

Broadly, findings from this study suggest that the extent to which romantic relationships influence military commitment varies by the degree to which partner goals and perspectives are valued. In turn, military life may be too much for some relationships to bear, as evidenced by relationship dissolutions described as a function of military experiences. Moreover, disruptions from PCS relocations and deployments on romantic relationships extend beyond the transition itself, as evidenced by service members missing important milestones, transitions negatively affecting partner career aspirations, and transitions inducing feelings of isolation or distress among partners. In addition, experiences unique to the LGBT community were shared in relation to both individual wellbeing (e.g., feeling distress over concealment, discrimination, and political climate) and relationship quality. The conceptual model guiding this research and drawn from work-family conflict as well as findings from Study 1, were especially instructive in directing
attention to stressors in different domains and identifying recursive patterns of influence between military and work.

Findings revealed opportunities and challenges facing sexual minority service members during different deployment phases. Participants shared apparent opportunities for relationship growth and connection through novel experiences. Transitions drew some relationships closer, and partners motivated each other to succeed. Specifically, service members in this study identified eight benefits of military service on romantic relationships as interpreted by the investigator: deepening relational connections, finding novel ways to show love, self-expansion through novel experiences, financial security, opportunities to travel, reconnecting or reinvigorating a bond after time apart, pushing each other to succeed, and showing each other new ways of life. These findings are consistent with prior work suggesting that transitions promote some positive experiences for military couples (Karney & Crown, 2011; Knobloch & Theiss, 2012; Newby et al., 2005). Negative impacts of military experiences on relationships were also found, paralleling findings on the consequences of deployments on relational welfare (Nelson Goff et al., 2007; SteelFisher et al., 2008; Warner et al., 2009). Eight challenges were identified, including the burden on partners to adapt to military life, changes in partner employment, increased time away from home, relationship dissolutions, lack of communication, increased tension before transitions, problems reconnecting after transitions, and missing important milestones or family events.

Most participants in Study 2 experienced some degree of work-family conflict between two “greedy” institutions – their family and the U.S. military. Consistent with the work-family conflict and stress spillover literature, participant stress from military experiences and difficulties faced during deployment or PCSs had an impact on their partners, specifically, and their
romantic relationship in general (Knobloch & Theiss, 2012). Furthermore, romantic partner perspectives or difficulties with military life, such as feeling isolated or unsupported, worsened challenges and contributed to role conflict for the service member, supporting findings from previous work (e.g., Fellows et al., 2016). On a theoretical level, this qualitative study similarly extends work-family conflict perspective to capture other factors at play that either facilitate or inhibit tension between institutions for sexual minority service members. The concept of “tied migrants” is supported by these data, and even served as a rationale for diminishing military commitment as geographical relocations and deployments have consequences for partner goals (Cooke, 2013; Cooke & Spiers, 2005; Hosek et al., 2002; Kleykamp, 2013). Thus far, issues relevant to all military relationships have been discussed. However, specific stressors and supports relevant to sexual minorities were gleaned from interview data, as well. Elements of minority stress theory emerged from these data with implications for theory development.

Sexual minority service members and their families undergo sexual minority stressors, or stress emerging from being a member of the LGBT community, in addition to normative stressors (e.g., separation, relocation, fear around service member safety) of military family life (Goldbach et al., 2023; Park, 2011; Meyer, 2003). Sexual minority stress refers to stress related to being a member of the LGBT community (Meyer, 2003) and consequent poor health outcomes primarily used to explain health disparities. However, minority stress also contributes to relationship strain in same-gender romantic relationships (Rotosky & Riggle, 2017). Military minority stressors include fear of being outed to military members, feeling the need to conceal sexual minority status to other military personnel, and adverse treatment or discrimination by leadership or other military personnel due to sexual minority status (Goldbach et al., 2023).
Participants in Study 2 shared military minority stressors as challenges they had to manage on their own and stressors that affected their romantic relationship functioning. Participants reported fear over being out as an LGBT person at work and feeling isolated as a consequence. Importantly, rejection and concealment expectations may hinder receipt of support, illuminating the consequences of minority stress (Meyer, 2003). In addition, participants described having to work harder than those without minority identities. Participants also shared feeling unsafe moving to duty stations in locations generally unwelcoming for LGBT people, and this experience was marked as something that heterosexuals especially do not need to consider as they progress in their military careers. This study represents one of the first qualitative explorations of military minority stress and romantic relationship quality; however, themes are supported by prior research in the civilian sector (Balsam & Szymanski, 2005; Frost & Meyer, 2009; Mohr & Daly, 2008; Song et al., 2020). For example, other research similarly finds patterns of negative associations between sexual minority stressors such as internalized homophobia, sexual identity concealment, internalized homonegativity, and stigma consciousness with romantic relationship satisfaction among sexual minorities (Frost & Meyer, 2009; Song et al., 2020). Participants in this study shared experiences of gender-based, sexual orientation, and racial discrimination, concealment and fear around coming out, and one participant shared internalized negative attitudes towards the LGBT community. Study 2 serves as a launch point to explore the effects of military minority stress on romantic relationships further, especially given that, to the investigator’s knowledge, no research currently exists on military minority stress and romantic relationship quality. Multiple minority stressors were apparent, as well, and warrant further exploration, given that belonging to more than one
minority group and experiencing stigmatization and discrimination can have deleterious effects on individuals (Banks, 2012).

One particularly significant factor affecting the wellbeing of participants both individually and concerning romantic relationships was LGBT visibility and acceptance in the military and local communities and building connections with other LGBT people – and especially other LGBT families. Some participants did find that LGBT people are generally accepted in the military and shared that they were able to influence and improve attitudes toward LGBT people. Having connections with other LGBT people was considered positive for relationships, and resources that were available seemed to be immensely helpful for building social support. However, participants shared that these resources were not available everywhere and were generally hard to come by. In addition, connecting with other sexual minority families with children seemed to be especially difficult, but building networks with these families was considered an important factor when describing connectedness with the LGBT community. Moreover, some participants discussed experiences around family planning and resources offered by the military for same-gender families seeking to have children, as well as differences in experiences for lesbian and gay couples. Prior qualitative data mirror these findings, also showing family conception and seeking military resources as a particularly salient and challenging experience for same-gender couples (Sullivan et al., 2021).

Other directions for research flow from limitations in this study. First, and like the majority of prior work on military romantic relationships (e.g., Knobloch & Theiss, 2012; McNulty, 2005; SteelFisher et al., 2008; Sullivan et al., 2021) this study only included data from service members and not from their partners. Though this was intentional to match the eligibility criteria in Study 1, dyadic data would demarcate interdependence between members of a couple. This
study included a small sample of service members, and generalizability was not a goal of this research. That said, future research may seek to broaden this work to include more gay men, gender diverse people, and include service members and their partners diverse with respect to race, ethnicity, rank, and branch to explore potential differences in patterns as a next step in this program of work. All participants were in current romantic relationships, and thus may have different perspectives on the positives and negatives of military life on their romantic relationships as opposed single service members. Even though some participants shared how military service negatively impacted prior relationships, this could be explored further among those service members with varied relationship experiences or statuses. Future work may seek to empirically examine the effects of spouses on same-gender romantic relationships in the military, and in particular, the spouse’s role in reducing stress caused by work-life conflict. In addition, future research may dive deeper into the relationship maintenance strategies used by same-gender military couples to lessen the consequences of stress spillover on their romantic relationships or their performance at work.
Chapter V. Discussion

The studies in this dissertation project reflect one of the first empirical investigations of same-gender military romantic relationships among active-duty service members, contextualizing the link between romantic relationship quality and military commitment. The current mixed-methods sequential explanatory research effort aimed to characterize the associations between transition-related stress, romantic relationship quality, and military commitment among sexual minority military personnel and to explore whether community connectedness protects against the effects of stress. This set of studies was shaped by a conceptual moderated mediation model using tenets from work-family conflict and stress spillover to support the hypothesized link between transition-related stress, romantic relationship quality, and military commitment, and provides unique information about the challenges and opportunities inherent in military life for sexual minority service members and their partners. Simultaneously, this project reinforces the value of a mixed-methods sequential explanatory approach. Each study contributed to an improved understanding of the overarching research question, seeking to understand the nature of the relationships of interest and whether LGB community connectedness contributes to these relationships.

Study 1 leveraged archival data to broach interrelationships between transition-related stress, romantic relationship quality, and military commitment while considering the impact of LGB community connectedness. In this quantitative phase, bivariate correlations revealed a negative association between romantic relationship quality and military commitment – though this association was statistically weak. As romantic relationship quality increased, military commitment seemed to decrease. Study 1 found no relationship between transition-related stress and romantic relationship quality. Next, Study 1 found a statistically significant interaction
between LGB community connectedness and transition-related stress on romantic relationship quality, such that higher levels of transition stress were associated with higher relationship quality when LGB community connectedness was lower. Finally, though not statistically significant, Study 1 presented some preliminary indication that romantic relationships could mediate the link between transition-related stress and military commitment, warranting further exploration. Alone, findings from Study 1 touched upon our understanding of the research question but left unanswered questions. That is, one single data source in this novel area of work would have been insufficient to meet the current research objective without a second, complementary method enhancing results and filling in gaps. Thus, these findings were clarified and expounded upon in the qualitative phase.

Study 2 used one-on-one semi-structured qualitative interviews to explicate relationships between variables explored in Study 1 and to understand complexities, challenges, and opportunities faced by sexual minority military personnel. Findings from Study 2 primarily supported results from Study 1 and further clarified the experiences of sexual minority military personnel. First, Study 2 results elucidated the association between higher romantic relationship quality and lower military commitment. Specifically, participants who seemed to value their partner's perspective tended to question whether they wanted to continue serving in the military, even if they initially planned on retiring by serving at least 20 years. The one participant who did not mention partner perspective as an essential factor to consider was steadfast about continuing to serve through retirement regardless of the needs of their romantic relationship.

Moreover, couples with children or who planned on having children noted that military life did not align with how they envisioned spending time with their families. Time away from home, missing important milestones, stressful operational tempo, and relationship strain as a
function of military life were antithetical to sustaining family functioning in a meaningful way for service members in Study 2. In this way, understanding what supports are needed to make military life more conducive to family life could help identify facilitators to keeping military personnel committed to service.

Next, in Study 2, a few participants asserted that they keep their work stress and home life separate, providing a different explanation for the lack of association between transition stress and romantic relationship quality in Study 1. However, most interview data did not precisely point to work stress as a primary factor threatening romantic relationship quality, though some mentioned it as a source of stress spillover. Alternatively, interviews revealed that the burden of military experiences more broadly (while including transitions) on partner wellbeing seemed to have a more significant effect on romantic relationships. That is, spending time apart due to operational tempo or transitions, consequences for partner employment or other aspirations, compromised communication, and tension over different transition phases seemed to have more of an impact or were more salient to service members when reflecting on how being in the military affected their romantic relationships.

Third, Study 2 findings on relationship growth cast light on the interaction result from Study 1, where higher levels of transition stress were linked with higher relationship quality when LGB community connectedness was lower. Even during stressful transitions, participants found ways to express love and communicate as effectively as possible with their partners. Moreover, some participants stated that even though their transitions were challenging, having their partner with them helped them succeed and accomplish their goals. It could be that military personnel in strong relationships lean more on their partners than anyone else to help reduce the consequences of higher levels of stress. Focusing on the strengths and resiliencies of same-
gender military couples may help to illustrate the mechanisms behind relationships as a protective factor against military minority stress. While prior research has consistently indicated elevated risks of adverse outcomes among military spouses, most military families still report healthy overall functioning (e.g., Sullivan et al., 2015). Thus, resilience processes among military couples should be considered in light of how sexual minority military couples fare when faced with stressors (Sullivan et al., 2021).

Finally, though not statistically significant, Study 1 presented some preliminary indication that romantic relationships could mediate the link between transition-related stress and military commitment, assuming a mediation effect actually exists yet was not adequately captured by the underpowered analysis. Qualitative findings resonated with this result. All 14 participants attested to stressors on their romantic relationships directly as a function of military life. Two participants described a recursive relationship between romantic relationships and military stress, such that, at times, stress from romantic relationships affected focus at work. When asked if their romantic relationship impacts whether they would like to stay in the military, 13 of 14 participants concurred that their relationship substantially impacts military commitment. Three participants revealed that military commitment contributed to the dissolution of prior relationships. Though the link between military-related stress and military commitment seemed to operate partly through romantic relationship quality, these relationships were described as bi-directional. Additional research is needed to explore the potential mediation effects using a longitudinal approach to assess whether directional effects exist with a larger cohort of sexual minority participants. Different sources of stress should also be explored; from Study 2 results, military transition stress and minority stress manifest in different ways and have distinct impacts on romantic relationship quality.
Implications and Recommendations

Results from this study revealed support for the work-family conflict and stress spillover perspectives. That family goals interfered with participants' desire to stay committed to the military beyond contractual obligations parallels Greenhaus & Beutell's (1985) conceptualization of work-family conflict, such that military-related pressures were incompatible with successfully achieving the family life referenced by Study 2 participants and reflected in the negative correlation found in Study 1 between romantic relationship quality and military commitment. Further, Study 2 participants described the "pour over" between work and home stress and being stuck in a "constant tumble" when work stress seeps into the home. Moreover, balancing both military and family lives was described as a "strain" on romantic relationships by Study 2 participants because service members are essentially "trying to juggle both things."

Aside from transition-related stress, interview data revealed other sources of stress. Specifically, participants described minority military stressors as detrimental to personal wellbeing, and lack of visibility and acceptance in the military was distressing for romantic relationships. This pattern of findings yields promising directions for future theory development in this program of work. Goldbach (2023) was the first to operationalize military minority stress as one contextual extension of the minority stress model. To develop his measure of military minority stress, items were gleaned from qualitative life history interviews with active-duty LGBT military personnel. Findings from the current studies support extending Goldbach's work to quantitatively evaluate military minority stress effects on romantic relationship quality in particular. Furthermore, there may be military minority stressors specific to romantic relationships, as evidenced by qualitative analyses in Study 2. Namely, safety around duty station locations, visibility as a same-gender family, feeling as though sexual minority romantic
relationships are not minimized or undervalued, and establishing social networks to prevent romantic partners from feeling isolated following PCS or during deployments extend to romantic relationship stress that is not currently captured by Goldbach's (2023) measure of minority military stress.

Concerns about safety when selecting duty stations are not uncommon among minority groups. For example, a recent report indicated that over 40% of racial minority service members rejected duty assignments due to concerns over discrimination or racism, even though those duty assignments may have helped their careers (aMFLS; Department of Applied Research at Blue Star Families, D'Aniello Institute for Veterans and Military Families; 2021). In Study 2, participants shared concern over safety as LGBT people in different duty stations and fear over safety affecting whether they would accept certain duty stations. These experiences are relevant to gender-diverse personnel as well. This research effort did not include gender-diverse service members; however, future research may build on the effects of gender-minority stress on romantic relationships by including the experiences of gender-minority service members and their families. Gender minority stress (Testa et al., 2015) extends the minority stress model by accounting for stressors unique to transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals. Like the minority stress model, gender-diverse people face distinct stress and resilience factors contributing to wellbeing. In the military, gender-diverse service members were permitted to serve since 2021 (White House Executive Order, 2021). Thus, gender-diverse service members are a fundamental group to study to better support their romantic relationships.

All told, what remains clear throughout both studies is that the military has its own challenges unique to personnel in romantic relationships and additional difficulties for personnel in same-gender romantic relationships that warrant further exploration. Findings from these
studies suggest that the LGBT-inclusive policy in the DoD does not sufficiently protect service members from discrimination in the military. In addition, though troops look to policy for guidance, cultural norms, and behaviors are trickled down from military leadership. Qualitative data suggested that military personnel did not always feel safe being out and felt their relationships were not taken seriously. In addition, participants shared concerns about retaliation should they come out as an LGBT person to someone who may hold anti-LGBT attitudes.

**Recommendations**

Findings from Study 2 may contribute to a framework for policy and program recommendations to support service experiences of sexual minority romantic relationships. Findings from this study may also inform policy-related efforts to facilitate diversity and inclusion measures for military families, helping all military families feel safe to express themselves. For example, findings from this research may contribute to Military Community and Family Policy under the Office of the Under Secretary for Personnel and Readiness. Military Community and Family Policy develops, directs, and manages quality-of-life programs for military community members to assure Total Force relevance and effectiveness in meeting the needs of service members and their families. Other military-specific programs that may benefit from learning about the experiences of diverse military families include Marine Corps Community Services, Army Soldier and Family Resources, Airmen and Family Readiness, and Navy Fleet and Family Support Center. This research aligns with military family readiness policy (DoDI 1342.22). It may inform the development of this policy to include efforts to reinforce community connectedness for diverse military families and added support for romantic relationships. Looking forward, findings from this research elicit three specific recommendations to support LGBT service members and their families:
1) Update diversity, equity, and inclusion plans to address challenges sexual minority service members and their families face while identifying best practices to work alongside local communities around duty locations to remediate these challenges. While there seems to be intensive efforts to understand and address issues related to LGBT service members concerning equal opportunity or discrimination, there is little focus in diversity, equity, and inclusion plans within the DoD on how diversity relates to military family wellbeing. Additionally, echoing a well-articulated conclusion from Sullivan and colleagues (2021), branches should establish working groups devoted to identifying factors predicting LGBT family wellbeing to support ongoing research and evidence-based program development. A formal review of extant DoD policy affecting LGBT military personnel would help provide a framework to support updating diversity, equity, and inclusion plans.

2) Address access to existing resources for sexual minority service members, and especially LGBT social support resources, for all duty locations and not only duty locations in larger cities. Programs specifically attending to deployment and PCS phases and inclusive of diverse families may provide additional guidance during times of increased stress. Yet, little is known about whether LGBT military families are utilizing these programs. This recommendation was garnered directly from participants in Study 2, suggesting that while participants largely felt accepted in the military, there was still a perception of limited acceptance, especially concerning available resources to support LGBT families. This is supported by prior research similarly indicating that LGBT service members simultaneously felt accepted in the military community overall but perceived a lack of acceptance from military or base-specific resources and so avoided using such resources (Sullivan et al., 2021). In addition, participants in Study 2 shared that some excellent supports offered by the military were only
available in certain duty stations and would be helpful if available across military bases. Moreover, resources developed for military couples should be evaluated (e.g., to improve romantic relationship functioning, to facilitate family planning) to examine LGBT families' use of these services, but also facilitators and barriers to using services, and overall effectiveness to ensure inclusivity and continued success over time.

3) Evaluate resources developed to prevent discrimination. Though the U.S. military offers training and education materials to prevent discrimination in the military, these resources may not be routinely evaluated for effectiveness. Training and education materials should be continuously improved through external processes and outcome evaluations to minimize discrimination in the military. Programs demonstrating effectiveness in supporting or improving conditions for service members would indirectly contribute to supporting romantic relationship quality.

Limitations and Future Directions

Study findings helped to address a salient gap in the literature on military families, and highlighted the strength of a mixed methods approach by filling in quantitative gaps with rich, qualitative data to provide insight into relationships of interest. At the same time, it is appropriate to recognize several limitations concerning the results of this study. First, both studies were limited by challenges inherent in cross-sectional self-report data and non-probability sampling; however, it is essential to note that data for both studies were collected from difficult-to-reach marginalized populations. On top of seeking sexual minority respondents, eligibility criteria in Study 1 were narrow to meet study objectives, and eligibility criteria in Study 2 were narrow to obtain a sample as similar as possible to those respondents from Study 1. Self-report data and non-probability sampling may be necessary in reaching small or marginalized populations where
random sampling may not be productive, logistically practical, or cost effective. Thus, while these data are limited, this research contributed to scientific understanding on a unique population about which little is known.

Second, a set of measures drawn from other research and adapted from extant scales were used in Study 1, however, those measures used only a few items and may have not been entirely complete. For example, transition-related stress was measured with a single item. Single-item measures are criticized for lower or uncertain reliability, and for lacking the capacity to accurately tap complex psychological variables (Allen et al., 2022). Specifically, the measure used to tap transition-related stress only captured work-related stress broadly without addressing other stressors inherent in military transitions, including stress on romantic relationships or other family members, stress on relationships with leaders or military peers, financial stress, reintegration stress, stress around finding housing, and so on. Future research would benefit from incorporating a refined measure that encapsulates the many different facets of transition-related stress. Those studies could examine the impact of transition-related stress on military personnel and their families to identify areas for intervention or process improvement to reduce the burden of military transitions, and to develop evidence-based programming to facilitate service member wellbeing and family functioning during geographical moves and deployments.

Third, the analytic approach used in both studies did not delve into demographic or military-specific characteristics which may contribute to romantic relationship quality or military commitment. In addition, and due to the relatively small samples in these studies, it was not possible to systematically identify differences in demographic or military-specific characteristics, or to explore the possibility that they condition some of the relationships observed. Prior military romantic relationship research found significant differences in relational distress by rank,
relocation status, relationship status, and length of marital relationships among Army personnel (Anderson et al., 2011), however, to the investigator’s knowledge, this has not been explored in same-gender military couples. Future work may determine whether demographic or military-specific characteristics moderate links between military stressors, romantic relationship quality, and military commitment for sexual minority couples.

Finally, both studies were restricted to service member reports without perspectives of romantic partners. There may be challenges for LGBT family members that are not particularly recognized or understood by service members themselves.

These limitations may be addressed in future research. For example, future research may seek other sources of data or methodologies to temper limitations inherent in research relying solely on self-report cross-sectional data, and studies should be replicated and expanded in a larger representative sample of service members in same-gender romantic relationships. Prioritizing longitudinal designs and incorporating convergent parallel mixed methods would help improve scientific understanding of how stressors affect sexual minority service members and their families over time and throughout different phases of military life, from joining the service through training, PCSs, deployments, and military separation. Exploring patterns of results over time and analyzing different data sources in concert would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how sexual minority relationships are impacted by military service and vice versa. To expound on the impact of military life on romantic relationship functioning among sexual minority couples and vice versa, future work may utilize daily diary methods to account for acute events, stressors, or conversations related to military life for same-gender couples. Using a cross-lagged panel design would elucidate reciprocal relationships between romantic relationship quality or other features of romantic relationships and military
commitment or military career satisfaction over time and especially over the course of military transitions. This type of research may serve to develop or refine theory in this program of work and would contribute to understanding how to tailor programs and resources to best support service members and their partners.

Scale development and validation studies are critical to operationalize the different factors inherent in transition stress and other constructs that may impact romantic relationship quality and military commitment among all military families. Focus groups with military personnel and their romantic partners could be conducted as well to inform the development of specific items and scale dimensions, which would be tested and refined through survey administration.

In addition, future research should consider the effects of demographic and military characteristics on romantic relationship quality and military commitment for sexual minority service members and incorporate an intersectional approach to research designs to attend to specific challenges experienced by diverse military personnel. The complex intersections between personal characteristics and identities (e.g., Black bisexual women may experience discrimination differently than White gay men), and the different experiences associated with these intersections, have largely been overlooked in prior military research (Eichler, 2021). To address this, researchers may integrate intersectionality questions in the conceptual development, execution, interpretation, and dissemination of their research. For example, Eichler (2021) recommends military and veteran researchers self-reflect throughout their research process on whether their work incorporates an inclusive design from inception to final dissemination (Eichler, 2021, p.146).
Finally, future research should use multi-informant designs and administrative data to capture different perspectives, providing a more holistic picture of LGBT military family experiences. Utilizing other data sources in concert with self-report studies, such as administrative personnel data, would dispel some limitations inherent in self-report research. Defense organizational climate survey data could be leveraged as well to understand unit-level harassment, discrimination, and diversity and inclusion experiences among military personnel. Moreover, there are existing ongoing research efforts that employ multi-informant designs to understand the longitudinal effects of military service on warfighters and their families (e.g., The Millennium Cohort Family Study, Crum-Cianflone et al., 2014; The Study of Adolescent Resilience, Tannenbaum & McMaster, in review); however, these studies are beginning to gain traction among LGBT military personnel and do not necessarily include regular qualitative data to fill in gaps in experiences not captured by self-report survey data.

In addition to the proposed directions for future research to address limitations in this project, the current study findings point to a variety of intriguing research questions for future study. For example, Study 2 revealed added challenges faced by military families with children, who are also affected by military transitions and other military-specific stressors (e.g., Paris et al., 2010). Researchers may expand the focus from sexual minority military romantic relationships to LGBT families more broadly, and how military experiences affect relationships between family members. For example, what are the experiences of children in sexual minority military families? What are U.S.-based same-sex spouses and children’s experiences of social support or acceptance when service members, who may add legitimacy in military social networks, are deployed or stationed abroad? How does local acceptance of LGBT families affect children of sexual minority military couples following geographical relocations? Future work
may also assess resiliencies and strengths among LGBT military couples (e.g., Pflieger et al., 2020). For example, what are the patterns of strengths among sexual minority military couples? What are the effects of self-mastery, social support, and family communication on romantic relationship functioning or work performance among sexual minority military personnel? A separate task is to delve into expanding constructs of minority military stress and LGBT community connectedness. For example, future work may seek to develop and validate measures of military minority stress specific to romantic relationships, and LGBT military community connectedness.

Further, it could be that other community connections, visibility, or acceptance may be more important to service members and their families. Future research may explore the unique effects of different types of community connectedness. Prior demographic reports suggest that sexual minority families may be more demographically diverse than heterosexual counterparts. Specifically, though women comprise 14% of the U.S. armed forces, over 40% of sexual minority service members are women (Gates, 2010; Gates & Ost, 2004). Racial diversity among sexual minority service members is also on the rise. Black women in same-gender romantic relationships were significantly more likely to serve relative to Black women in heterosexual dyads; these findings were replicated among Latina women (Cahill, 2009). Sexual minority military members are also more likely to be in interracial relationships than heterosexual service members (Gates & Ost, 2004). Thus, future research may consider exploring the effects of intersectional identities, community connectedness, and romantic relationship quality for sexual minority service members. Prospective cohort studies with dyadic data collections and interview or focus group components may be a valuable approach to comprehensively recognizing this unique group.
Equally important, future research questions may seek to understand the availability, awareness, utilization, and impact of existing resources developed to support military families among sexual minority service members and their families. For example, are sexual minority military couples aware of existing family support resources? Does the use of family support resources in the military buffer effects of transition stress on romantic relationships? Does the use of family support resources in the military improve relationship closeness and communication skills prior to military transitions? Are there unique needs of sexual minority families that are not addressed by existing military family support programs?

Ultimately, findings from this set of studies provide a foundation for future research, theory development, and evidence-based interventions to support same-gender military romantic relationships, thereby strengthening military families and promoting wellbeing among our nation's warfighters. The robustness of the mixed-methods sequential explanatory approach in this research effort offset the limitations of quantitative and qualitative research alone while leveraging strengths from each approach. Concerted efforts to better understand how military life impacts the experiences of sexual minority service members and their families may contribute to improved family functioning and support the overall mission readiness of the U.S. armed forces.

Conclusion

Although research on military families continues to proliferate, studies predominantly reflect heteronormative military families primarily comprised of male service members married to female civilians. The military continues to become more diverse, and research is needed to better understand the needs of underserved service members and their families. The effects of military life on romantic relationship quality and commitment to military service among sexual minority service members are not adequately presented in the current military literature. As one
of the earliest empirical investigations of experiences among sexual minority military personnel in same-gender relationships, this set of studies makes a critical contribution to the broader literature on military families and catalyzes future research efforts on sexual minority military families.
References


https://doi.org/10.1080/10615806.2022.2038788


doi:10.1037/t00689-000; Full; Full text; 999900689_full_001.pdf


Theory, Method, and Research. Los Angeles, CA: Sage


U.S. Chamber of Commerce (Jun 2017) Military Spouses in the Workplace: Understanding the

134
impacts of spouse unemployment on military recruitment, retention, and readiness.

https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/sites/default/files/Military%20Spouses%20in%20the%20Workplace.pdf


https://doi.org/10.3928/00485713-20090201-11


Appendices

Appendix A. PATH Logo
Appendix B. PATH Social Media Recruitment Message

Hello/good afternoon/good morning/hi!

My name is Karen Tannenbaum and I’m a PhD student at Claremont Graduate University working with the Naval Health Research Center on project exploring the lives and experiences of active duty service members (for LGB-specific groups—add “LGB” before “active duty service members”). We are in the process of recruiting participants for a confidential 45-minute phone interview (during off-duty time), and we are providing a $25 Amazon gift card as compensation. I see that you are an administrator for ___________ Facebook [or Reddit, etc.] group. With your permission, may I please post to your group with some details about the interview and a website link for anyone wants to learn more about the project? I am also happy to answer any questions that you might have before making your decision. Please feel free to check out our project website: www.path-research.com. Thank you very much for your consideration!
Appendix C. PATH Recruiting Paragraph

Dear [name or title of community leader],

We are the principal investigators of a new research project titled “Personal Adjustment, Transitions, and Health” (PATH), and we are writing to ask for your assistance. Specifically, we ask for your help in publicizing this project by posting/distributing the attached flyer. This project is supported by funding from the Department of Defense, and is being conducted at the Naval Health Research Center (NHRC) and the Claremont Graduate University (CGU), both located in southern California. The project involves conducting phone interviews with active duty military personnel to learn about their relationships, social interactions, and interpersonal supports and challenges both inside and outside of the military. A unique and important aspect of the project is that we are deliberately attempting to interview a diverse range of service members, including men and women of all ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, and branches of service.

The attached overview provides a brief summary of the project; more information is also available on the project website www.path-research.com. The project has been approved by the Institutional Review Boards (IRBs) at both NHRC and CGU. These boards are charged with protecting the rights, privacy, and welfare of all research participants. A copy of the approved IRB protocol is also available upon request.

Karen Tannenbaum, the PATH Project Coordinator, will be contacting you in the next few weeks to answer any questions you have and to get confirmation that you are willing to assist with this project. Alternatively, you can contact Karen directly at Path.Interview@cgu.edu, or by calling (619) 553-8414.

Thank you in advance for your assistance.

Sincerely,

Allen M. Omoto, Ph.D.  
Claremont Graduate University  
Allen.omoto@cgu.edu

Cynthia J. Thomsen, Ph.D.  
Naval Health Research  
Path.Interview@cgu.edu

Claremont Graduate University
Appendix D. PATH recruitment flyer

ACTIVE DUTY?

PARTICIPATE IN PATH
Personal Adjustment, Transitions, and Health

Share your military experiences!

Anonymous 45 minute phone interview
Get a $25 Amazon Gift Card!

Anonymous 30 minute online questionnaire
Get a $40 Amazon Gift Card!

Visit www.path-research.com to learn more!

PATH Research is funded by the U.S. Department of Defense and conducted by Claremont Graduate University (CGU).

CSU IRR approved August 22, 2018.
Expires August 17, 2019.
Appendix E. PATH Study Website
Appendix F. PATH Qualtrics Email Invitation

WHAT DOES A TYPICAL EMAIL INVITATION TO A SURVEY LOOK LIKE?

A New Survey is Available

Hi Katy,

Someone wants to know what you think...

145
Award Value

25 min
Time to Complete

This survey won't be available for long. Act now if you're interested.

Take Your Survey

Can't open the link? You can copy the link below into your browser

After successfully completing this survey, it may take up to 5 business days to receive in your account

If you cannot participate in this survey we would appreciate it if you could decline participation in this survey by clicking on the following link: Decline survey
Appendix G. PATH Baseline Questionnaire Survey Items used in Study 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Construct</th>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Response set</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sociodemographic Characteristics</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Are you…</td>
<td>• Male&lt;br&gt;• Female&lt;br&gt;• Not listed (Please specify)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>How old are you?</td>
<td>• 18-19&lt;br&gt;• 20-21&lt;br&gt;• 22-24&lt;br&gt;• 25-27&lt;br&gt;• 28-30&lt;br&gt;• 31-39&lt;br&gt;• 40+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>What is the highest level of education you have completed?</td>
<td>• Less than high school diploma&lt;br&gt;• high school diploma&lt;br&gt;• GED or ABE certificate&lt;br&gt;• Some college, but no degree&lt;br&gt;• Associate’s/2 year/technical degree&lt;br&gt;• Bachelor’s/4-year degree&lt;br&gt;• Any graduate school or graduate degree (e.g., Master’s)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race/ethnicity</td>
<td>What is your race or ethnicity? Select all that apply</td>
<td>• White or European American&lt;br&gt;• Hispanic or Latino&lt;br&gt;• Black or African American&lt;br&gt;• Asian or Asian American&lt;br&gt;• American Indian or Alaska native&lt;br&gt;• Middle Eastern or North African&lt;br&gt;• Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual identity</td>
<td>Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation?</td>
<td>• Heterosexual/straight&lt;br&gt;• Gay or lesbian&lt;br&gt;• Bisexual&lt;br&gt;• Not listed (please specify)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship Characteristics</td>
<td>Length</td>
<td>How long have you been in this relationship?</td>
<td>• less than 6 months&lt;br&gt;• 6 months - less than 1 year&lt;br&gt;• 1 year - less than 2 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military Characteristics and Experiences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td>---</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Cohabitating status** | Do you currently live with your spouse/partner? | • 2 years - less than 4 years  
• 4 years - less than 6 years  
• 6 years - less than 8 years  
• 8 years or more |
| **Partner military status** | Is your spouse/partner... | • No, I’ve never lived with my spouse/partner  
• No, but I have lived with my spouse/partner in the past.  
• Yes.  |
| **Partner gender** | Is your spouse/partner… | • Male  
• Female  
• Not listed (please specify) |
| **Monogamy** | Are you in a monogamous sexual relationship with your spouse/partner? | • No  
• Yes |
| **Marital status** | Are you legally married to your spouse/partner? | • No  
• Yes |
| **Military** | Rank | What is your current rank? | • E1-E4  
• E5-E6  
• E7-E9  
• WO1-WO5  
• O1-O3  
• O4-O10 |
| **Characteristics and Experiences** | Number of PCSs | How many Permanent Changes of Station (PCS’s) have you had since you joined the military? | • 1  
• 2  
• 3  
• 4  
• 5 or more |
| | Number of deployments | How many total deployments (of at least 30 days) have you completed since you joined the military? | • 1  
• 2  
• 3  
• 4  
• 5 or more |
| **Transition-Related Stress** | Deployment- and PCS-related stress | As a result of your most recent deployment, how much stress did you have in your work life?  
During your most recent PCS, how much stress | • None at all  
• A little bit  
• Some  
• Quite a bit  
• A great deal |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LGB Community Connectedness*</th>
<th>LGB Psychological Sense of Community</th>
<th>did you have in your work life?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I have a sense of belonging with the LGB community.</td>
<td>I feel like an outsider in the LGB community.</td>
<td>• 1 = strongly disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel like an outsider in the LGB community.</td>
<td>I am proud to be a member of the LGB community.</td>
<td>• 2 = somewhat disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am proud to be a member of the LGB community.</td>
<td>I identify with the LGB community.</td>
<td>• 3 = neither agree nor disagree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I identify with the LGB community.</td>
<td>Being a member of the LGB community is very important to me.</td>
<td>• 4 = somewhat agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being a member of the LGB community is very important to me.</td>
<td>All members of the LGB community face similar challenges.</td>
<td>• 5 = strongly agree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All members of the LGB community face similar challenges.</td>
<td>I feel a sense of community with other LGB people.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel a sense of community with other LGB people.</td>
<td>Being LGB makes me feel bad about myself (reverse scored).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being LGB makes me feel bad about myself (reverse scored).</td>
<td>Being LGB makes me feel good about myself.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being LGB makes me feel good about myself.</td>
<td>Being LGB is part of what makes me special.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Being LGB is part of what makes me special.</td>
<td>I feel supported as an LGB service member.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Romantic Relationship Quality*</th>
<th>Relative Relationship Closeness</th>
<th>How close is your relationship with your current spouse/partner compared to your other relationships (e.g., relationships with</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Relative Relationship Closeness</td>
<td>How close is your relationship with your current spouse/partner compared to your other relationships (e.g., relationships with</td>
<td>1 = much less close</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 = much less close</td>
<td>2 = somewhat less close</td>
<td>3 = about the same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 = somewhat less close</td>
<td>3 = about the same</td>
<td>4 = somewhat closer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 = about the same</td>
<td>4 = somewhat closer</td>
<td>5 = much closer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 = somewhat closer</td>
<td>5 = much closer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Note. * denotes variables included in predictive models | friends and family members)? | Satisfaction | Overall, how satisfied are you with your relationship with your current spouse/partner? | 1 = extremely dissatisfied  
2 = somewhat dissatisfied  
3 = neither satisfied nor dissatisfied  
4 = somewhat satisfied  
5 = extremely satisfied |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Responsiveness | My partner understands me.  
My partner values my abilities and opinions.  
My partner makes me feel cared for  
[relationship security]: I feel secure in my relationship with my partner  
[love]: I love my partner | 1 = strongly disagree  
2 = somewhat disagree  
3 = neither agree nor disagree  
4 = somewhat agree  
5 = strongly agree |
| Satisfaction with emotional support | How satisfied are you with the emotional support and assistance you get from your...spouse/partner? | 1 = extremely dissatisfied  
2 = somewhat dissatisfied  
3 = neither satisfied nor dissatisfied  
4 = somewhat satisfied  
5 = extremely satisfied |
| Military Commitment* | Intent to continue serving in the military | 1 = Definitely no  
2 = Probably no  
3 = Not sure  
4 = Probably yes  
5 = Definitely yes |
| Military commitment | How committed are you to having a career in the military? | 1 = Not at all  
2 = A little bit  
3 = Moderately  
4 = Quite a bit  
5 = Extremely |
Appendix H. Semi-Structured Interview Guide

In this project, I am interested in learning about the lives and experiences of military personnel in same-gender romantic relationships. This includes learning about the nature of your romantic relationship and the interplay between your relationship and your life as a military member. I have a list of prepared questions to ask you. At times, I will ask you to say more about something or to clarify or expand on your answers. At other times I may ask that we move to the next topic to respect your time and stay on schedule. Also, I will be taking a few notes during our conversation, so I may need to pause now and then. Is that okay? (Pause)

As a reminder, your participation in this interview is completely voluntary—if at any time you feel uncomfortable with a question, you can tell me to skip it, or if you would like to withdraw completely from the study, that is OK too. You can also just take a break or pause if you need to. Just let me know.

We will be discussing some personal topics today, so it’s important that you are in a private place, a place where you feel comfortable talking.

Next, you may or may not remember that I will be audio recording this interview. The reason for that is so that I can focus on what you’re saying without trying to write it all down. Later, research staff will create a transcript of the interview. Is that okay with you?

Do you have any questions so far? (Pause)

Okay, then I’m going to start the recording now. Just a second.

This is Karen, interviewing participant (ID: 01-10) on (DATE).

As we get started, let me tell you a bit more about how we are protecting your privacy today. As I was saying, this interview will be audio recorded, and then transcribed. The transcript will be reviewed, and anything that may identify you—such as names or locations—will be deleted or replaced with non-specific information. This might be something like inserting John Doe for a person’s name. After the recording is transcribed, the audio file will be permanently deleted. I will never identify you as a participant or provide information that may permit other people to figure out that you took part. Do you have any questions before we begin the interview?

I’m going to start by asking you some questions about your identities and characteristics.

1. How old are you?
2. What is your gender and sexual identity?
3. How would you describe your race and ethnicity?

Thank you for sharing that with me. Now, I’ll ask you about your military service.

4. What is your branch of service?
5. How long did you serve in the military/how long have you been in the military?
6. What is your rank in the military?
7. What is your job in the military?

8. What was your primary reason for joining the military?

Now, I’d like to ask you about your romantic relationship. I’ll start by asking some pointed questions about your relationship characteristics, and then we will go a bit more in depth about your romantic relationship.

9. How did you meet your partner?

10. What is your current relationship status?
   a. Prompt: Are you currently married?
   b. Prompt: Would you describe your relationship as monogamous or non-monogamous?
   c. Prompt: Are you currently living together?

11. What is your partner’s gender identity? Sexual identity?

12. Is your partner also a service member or does your partner have a history of military service?
   a. [IF PARTNER HAS A HISTORY OF MILITARY SERVICE] Follow up: Did you ever both serve on active duty at the same time?

13. How long have you been in a romantic relationship with your partner?
   a. Did your relationship start before or after you started your military service?

Okay, thank you for describing a bit about your relationship. Now, I’d like to talk about your experiences as a service member in a romantic relationship.

14. Let’s start broadly – what is it like to be in the military while in a romantic relationship?
   Please tell me about your experiences in the military while in a same-gender relationship.
   a. PROMPT: What are the benefits?
b. PROMPT: What are the challenges?

15. What contexts or situations have typically affected your experiences as a service member in a romantic relationship?)

16. Has being in a relationship impacted your commitment to the military? How so?

I want to learn more about how your romantic relationship impacts your military service and vice versa – if at all.

17. In what ways does being in the military affect your romantic relationship?
   a. Are there ways that your command climate or leadership may affect your relationship?

18. In what ways does being in a romantic relationship affect your experiences in the military?

19. Have you been through a PCS or deployment with your partner?
   a. IF YES
      i. How many deployments/PCSs have you been through with your current partner?
         1. IF MORE THAN 1: Which deployment/PCS do you think was most impactful on your relationship?
   b. IF YES TO BOTH
      i. Which experience do you think was more impactful on your relationship?

Okay, let’s talk about that [PCS or deployment].

20. Please tell me a little bit about this [PCS or deployment].

21. In what ways did this experience affect your romantic relationship?
22. In what ways did your romantic relationship affect your experience during your PCS or deployment?
   a. Are there ways this PCS/deployment negatively affected your romantic relationship?
   b. Are there ways this PCS/deployment positively affected your romantic relationship?

Thank you for sharing that with me. Now, I’d like to ask you about the communities you belong to, and whether your experience in those communities is linked to your romantic relationship.

Let’s start with your relationship with the LGBT community.

23. What does the LGBT community look like to you?
   a. This could be a social group of friends, this could be an online LGBT community, this could be a meet up group, or this could be the LGBT community on a broader level

24. What is your relationship like with the LGBT community?

25. Do you feel a sense of belonging in the LGBT community? How so?

26. In what ways, if any, has being a part of the LGBT community affected your experiences as a service member – whether positive or negative?

27. In what ways, if any, has being a part of the LGBT community affected your romantic relationship – whether positive or negative?

Now, I’d like to discuss your relationship with the military community.

28. What is your relationship like with the military community? This could include memberships in military-related volunteer groups or social events, your sense of pride as a military member, or you could talk about what the military means to you, personally.
a. Are you close with others in your unit or working group?

29. Do you feel a sense of belonging in the military? How so?
   a. In what ways, if any, has your involvement in the military community affected your romantic relationship?

Thanks so much for sharing, we are nearly finished with the interview. I just have a few questions to wrap up.

30. Does your romantic relationship have any impact on whether you would like to stay in the military? How so?

31. Is there anything else you feel we should have talked about regarding your experiences in a romantic relationship while on active duty?
   a. Is there anything else about your military service and your romantic relationship you would like to share that I may have missed?
# Appendix I: Study 2 Codebook

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Files</th>
<th>References</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship Strain and Career Progression</strong></td>
<td>Decisions about career progression or decisions around whether to stay in the military in the context of family or partner goals. Includes impact of military experiences on relationships such as strain or stress on relationships.</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*<em>LGBT Visibility and Acceptance in the Military, and Establishing Connections</em> **</td>
<td>Feeling seen and accepted by others (either other military personnel or civilians) as an LGBT person and what that means for the participants’ romantic relationships and military service. Psychological or physical connection with the LGBT community, and what it means for the participants’ romantic relationships and military service.</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Family Planning</strong></td>
<td>Experiences around support/visibility for participants who are planning to have children or who currently have children.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Relationship Dynamics and Growth</strong></td>
<td>Text related to specific relationship dynamics or maintenance (e.g., communication) and relational growth.</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Minority Stress</strong></td>
<td>Stress stemming from distal stress processes (discrimination, prejudice) or proximal stress processes (expectation of rejection, identity concealment) based on sexual minority status – but may include other stressors related to race/ethnicity or gender.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stress Spillover</strong></td>
<td>Any text pertinent to stress from work affecting (or spilling into) romantic relationship and vice versa.</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Files and references for coded text under LGBT Visibility and Acceptance do not include files and references from Family Planning.*
Appendix J: Reflexivity Statement

I am connected to the military community as an employee of a defense contracting company, where my goals as a research scientist center on evidence-based strategies to improve the lives and experiences of active-duty service members. My research focus in this position is on experiences of sexual minority and gender diverse service members, and military families. I am in a same-gender romantic relationship with an active-duty service member and have experienced four military transitions during this relationship thus far, including one unaccompanied overseas Permanent Change of Station (PCS), two accompanied PCSs, and one submarine deployment. This information was only shared with participants when explicitly asked. Participants were recruited largely through social and professional networks. All participants were asked to share study information with other military members they know who may be eligible for and interested in participating in this research study.

My epistemological perspective is interpretive/constructive in nature. This is exemplified by the research design I chose for this study. The objective of the interviews conducted in this study was to get a sense of the participants’ lived experiences as service members or recent veterans in romantic relationships. The open-ended questions used offer an outline for descriptive text, though participants were encouraged to share information that did not lie within the bounds of each question. At times, I responded to participants to ask to clarify their responses to ensure understanding, and at times responses were paraphrased back to participants to ensure their points were understood as they intended. While keeping the overarching research question in mind, responses were categorized with key markers of influence oscillating between military and home spheres, making note of explicit influences between the two domains and where the domains overlapped identified using a post-hoc approach. That is, a codebook was not developed
in advance of data analysis or synthesis. Without multiple coders, there was not an analysis of intercoder agreement to address reliability. However, a codebook of codes was developed, and transcripts were revisited repeatedly to ensure an in-depth understanding of the data. I maintained critical subjectivity to have awareness of my own psychological states at each phase of the research process, bracketing this out of analyses.
Appendix K: Transcription Notation

[...] indicates elision for clarity or focus.

text] indicates vague, generic material added by the author to reduce risk of compromising participant confidentiality.