



MLDC Research Areas

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Propensity to Serve in the Armed Forces Service, Citizenship, and Diversity

Abstract

A person's propensity to serve in the U.S. military is a function of both personal inclination and the support that person receives from his or her community of identity. Traditionally, marginalized/minority communities of identity in the United States have encouraged their best and brightest to pursue military service as one means of establishing the community as worthy of citizenship, with all associated rights and privileges. However, communities of identity increasingly expect to retain their distinctive cultural identity markers, and this expectation may set minority members at odds with policies of uniformity in the military, creating subsequent tensions with the sending community. Thus, current policies on accommodation and uniformity may create disincentives to serve. In exploring these issues and weighing essential and nonessential aspects of uniformity for valued service, the military may discover means of increasing representation in its ranks.

There exists a dilemma: On one hand, minority and marginalized communities within the United States pursue military service as a means of social and political validation, but may resist the acculturation demands of the military. On the other, the military seeks to fill its ranks with new recruits and retain as many as possible beyond first enlistment, but insists on acculturation, with few exceptions.

Under the all volunteer force (AVF), the Department of Defense (DoD) has sought to resolve this dilemma by focusing primarily on the desires and aspirations of individual men and women rather than on communities of identity. In providing financial and other material incentives to serve or to remain in service, the military may persuade some individuals to accept the acculturation that the military requires.¹

A complementary approach to these individually-focused incentives would be to direct informed attention to the communities from which individuals emerge, emphasizing the full and complete citizenship that military service may help secure, not only for the individuals who serve but also for their communities. This approach would transcend material incentives and help address cultural and symbolic incentives, thus enhancing positive community involvement in the propensity to serve.

Some communities, particularly ethnic or cultural minorities, demonstrate insular qualities, remaining adamant about maintaining their distinctiveness over generations of existence within a majority culture (Jensen, 2003). Conversely, they may also act as agents of change, promoting better lives and greater social acceptance for their members by encouraging individuals to pursue specific endeavors to enable all to succeed. Whether insular or flexible, the fact remains that communities form individuals and, in turn, are reformed by them. Communities impart values, sustain and support individuals and families as they encounter difficulties during transitions and in achieving goals, and define standards for success, including legitimizing life and work paths for their members (Goode, 1957; Kasarda & Janowitz, 1974).

Successful sustainment of the AVF, therefore, may be enhanced by incentivizing both individuals and their communities of identity, particularly in light of the motivational power the latter wield over individuals considering military service. For example, some communities may express distrust of the established social order, distrust based on historical perceptions of themselves as victims of unwarranted discrimination, on the tenuousness of their own position in society, or on the fear of losing their unique identities through compromise and acculturation. Such distrust can and does lead to unwillingness to support military service by the children within these communities. Under a policy of conscription,

such unwillingness was a matter of concern, but it did not preempt legal responsibilities. Under the AVF, such unwillingness may present a formidable obstacle to successful service (Leal, 2005; Simon & Lovrich, 2009).²

In the past, DoD has successfully exploited the desire for full and complete citizenship as one means to transcend community suspicions. Military policies during the early 20th century, and particularly during World War I, reflected a clear understanding of the correlation between respect for the culture of soldiers and a subsequent increase in morale by deliberately creating a training atmosphere that permitted and encouraged dual identities—American and ethnic—and softening the normally rigid acculturation policies. The Camp Gordon Plan, for example, organized Slavs, Italians, Poles, Jews, and Latinos into linguistic companies commanded by officers who spoke their languages (unnamed U.S. Army officer, 1918). This effort proved so successful at creating effective war fighters that the Army eventually created numerous similar camps (Ford, 2001), demonstrating that, when employed, a strategy of cultural respect can prove beneficial to the military, to communities of identity, and to the nation as a whole.

Citizenship: Juridical, Social-Psychological, and Cultural

DoD's concerns about citizenship issues with regard to marginal/minority communities is legitimate, as evidenced by the historical record and the role military service has played in the United States' developing national conscience. In U.S. history, the concept of citizenship has taken on many meanings and dimensions. The concept of national citizenship increased in significance after the Civil War, when the Fourteenth Amendment recognized as citizens almost all people born or naturalized in the United States, regardless of race.³ This juridical citizenship included the rights bestowed on and obligations owed by individuals to the national community—rights and obligations that contributed to the well-being of the nation.

Although military service is not a requirement for citizenship, such service historically has been recognized as a social marker that acknowledges a person's commitment to the country's well-being. For example, Native Americans were afforded the right to apply for citizenship in 1919 based specifically on their honorable service during World War I.⁴ Consequently, within military service lies the promise that one may gain and enjoy citizenship's entitlements and benefits, such as voting, a passport, a security clearance, access to education, and the ability to sponsor relatives from overseas. As members of immigrant communities pursue juridical citizenship status through their service in the armed forces, therefore, the good of the entire community may be enhanced. Thus, it can be in the best interests of communities that seek inclusion in the American experience to encourage military service by community members.

Another type of citizenship, social-psychological, comprises more than legal benefits. Although some may serve in the military in the hope of attaining juridical citizenship status, others—native-born Americans whose legal status is unimpeachable but who are members of minority communities—have approached military service, at least in part, in the hope of gaining acknowledgment as citizens in terms of citizenship's social-psychological aspects (Burk, 1995; Fredman & Falk, 1954; Krebs, 2005, 2006; Lawson, 1996; Paret, 1992). African-Americans, for example, possessed legal citizenship after 1868, but the ability to claim a fully realized social-psychological citizenship eluded them for nearly a century. They and members of other cultural and ethnic groups looked to military service as one means by which individual members and their communities of identity might receive positive recognition from the majority culture. In both the juridical and social-psychological senses of citizenship, therefore, military service has been perceived by women and members of racial, ethnic, and religious minority communities as an avenue to proclaiming their worth and being acknowledged worthy by others (Burk, 1995; Fredman & Falk, 1954; Janowitz, 1980; Krebs, 2005, 2006; Lawson, 1996; Oboler, 2006; Paret, 1992; Yuval-Davis, 1997).

Today, a third dimension of citizenship—cultural citizenship (Miller, 2001)—demands consideration as communities of identity increasingly insist on the full legal rights and privileges of citizenship while preserving their unique strengths, values, and visible manifestations of identity, thereby maintaining their cultural distinctiveness vis-à-vis the majority. Cultural citizenship thus incorporates minority groups into American society while simultaneously retaining specific cultural forms and norms. This expanded view of citizenship demands political and social space for difference, as it also questions historic privileges afforded to the majority culture or cultures (Alexander, 2004; Flores & Benmayor, 1997; Glenn, 2002; Miller, 2001; Rosaldo, 1997).

In the past, military policy deliberately recognized communities of identity to facilitate recruitment and retention. These policies were, in turn, supported and augmented by community leaders, who assisted the military in “training immigrant soldiers and instilling American patriotism within their communities” so that their sons and daughters—and the communities as a whole—might gain the benefits of citizenship even as they accepted one of citizenship's greatest challenges” (Ford, 2001, p. 136). Late 20th-century and early 21st-century DoD policies have neither forsworn recognition of diversity nor failed to appreciate the sound business case for its desirability, as recognized in studies that noted increasing retention rates among minority recruits seeking citizenship status and in programs that offer fast-track citizenship to immigrants (Hattiangadi, Quester, Lee, Lien, & MacLeod, 2005; Preston, 2009). Current policies, however, may be incomplete to the extent they do not fully allow for the cultural aspects of diversity.

Challenges to Military Service, Citizenship, and Diversity in a Globalized World

In an increasingly globalized world, communities of identity are taking on greater importance in the formation of individuals. Marginalized and minority residents (and legal citizens) in the United States remain connected to their communities of origin, whether these exist primarily in the United States or overseas (Basch, Schiller, & Blanc, 1994; Clifford, 1994; Faist, 2000; Spiro, 2008; Vasquez, 2008).⁵ Some, even those actively pursuing citizenship status, maintain such close community ties that they choose to be memorialized after death within their extranational community of identity, as evidenced by the 2004 cremation in India of Spc. Uday Singh, a Sikh Army soldier from Chicago, Illinois, who was killed in Iraq while on patrol in 2003, only one month before he was to be sworn in as a U.S. citizen (Zoroya, 2005).

Because community identity ties continue to be strong, certain aspects of identity are deemed nonnegotiable in face of the demands by DoD for juridical, social-psychological, or cultural citizenship. These essential identity factors include distinctive cultural and religious traditions such as language, diet, distinctive dress, religious symbols and markings, and access to religious artifacts.⁶ The importance of these identity factors and the intransigence of communities in preserving them may complicate, even obstruct, DoD's recruitment and retention efforts.⁷

DoD's policy focus on assimilation and near-absolute uniformity as evidence of equality, fairness, and unit cohesion thus poses significant barriers to meaningful accommodation. DoD has made numerous attempts to grapple with demands made by minority members and communities for acknowledgment of, respect for, and accommodation of cultural difference. Such efforts, however, have resulted in further conflict, with those granted accommodation perceived as unfairly favored.⁸ To eliminate such conflict, the easiest and often preferred method is to eliminate all accommodations and resort to absolute uniformity. This, in effect, is reinforcement of the majority culture. Thus, the dilemma continues.⁹

Ideally, cultural negotiations result in mutual accommodation that accounts for the interests of all parties rather than simply the interests of the dominant group (Berry, 2004; Williams, 1977). Within the military Services, mutual accommodation may result in agreement that leads to some degree of integration of cultural factors or behaviors previously deemed incompatible with good order and discipline—a mutual accommodation that preserves uniformity, unity, and unit cohesion, albeit understood in a new light.

Conclusion

In the military context, a person's primary identity as a member of a minority or marginalized cultural community should be considered when exploring propensity to serve in the armed forces. Cultural and ethnic traditions constitute essential elements that inform a person's perception of identity, both in terms of the self and within his or her social-

identification community. This identity remains an intrinsic component of an individual even when he or she voluntarily assumes the identity of warrior (as a soldier, sailor, marine, or airman). Thus, DoD faces the challenge of recruiting from minority and marginalized cultural communities whose desires and demands for acceptance while preserving distinct characteristics grow ever louder and are ever more accepted by society as a whole. The manner in which DoD leaders address these diversities in realistic and practical ways is an essential element of raising and supporting the force into the foreseeable future.

Notes

¹See Hogan (2004) for more information on military compensation systems.

²Both articles examine national survey data regarding support of the U.S. military, and both find support among minority communities to be more polarized than among whites. Leal (2005) finds that Mexican-Americans and Cuban-Americans are more supportive of the military than are Latinos from Central and South America. Simon and Lovrich (2009) find that "African-American respondents are significantly more likely to be polarized in their opinion of mandatory military service than other Americans" (p. 382). Both articles indicate a greater sense of fracture among minority communities over their willingness to support military policy and involvement. This fracture indicates that such communities cannot be considered as unitary wholes but must be recognized for their individual characteristics and approached based on their specific interests and concerns.

³In an 1884 Supreme Court case, *Elk v. Wilkins* [112 U.S. 94 (1884)], the expansive interpretation of the citizenship clause of the Fourteenth Amendment was tested. In that case, the court held that children of Native Americans were not citizens, despite the fact they and their parents were born in the United States. The citizenship of Native Americans is complex, but all were declared U.S. citizens by Congress on June 2, 1924 (43 U.S. Statutes At Large, Ch. 233, p. 253). Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, and other Asian immigrants, however, even those who served honorably in the U.S. military during World War I and, in some cases, World War II, were not naturalized until much later (LeMay & Barken, 1999).

⁴The November 6, 1919, Indian Citizenship Act (U.S. Statutes At Large, XLI, 1919, p. 350; see McCool, Olson, & Robinson, 2007).

⁵In discussing the concepts of dual nationalities and multicultural citizenship, Faist (2000) states that "culture constitutes a basis for recognition and that special rights are necessary to empower minority groups to partake in the full rights and duties of the polity" (p. 220). His argument refutes traditional thinking on citizenship, which tends to relegate discriminated minorities to "an inferior social, economic and political position." The factors conducive to an increase in the realization of minority communities achieving multicultural status are facilitated by the propitious conditions provided by modern technologies (pp. 215–216).

⁶These nonnegotiable cultural identity factors may, for example, include those that accord with the dictates related to food of Judaism (kosher), Islam (*halal*), and Buddhism (vegetarianism); with wearing religious headgear, such as the yarmulke (Jewish headgear specifically allowed by a 1996 act of Congress), the *kufi* and *hijab* (Muslim), and the *dastar* (Sikh turban); with wearing religious symbols on necklaces or bracelets; with wearing religious undergarments as dictated by the doctrine of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and a number of conservative Christian churches; with bearing upon one's face religious markings, such as the smudge of burnt palm on Palm Sunday worn by Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Episcopalians; with serving in noncombatant roles in accordance with one's conscience or religious community; or with carrying religious artifacts, such as Odinist and Sikh knives. Negotiating cultural accommodations constitutes a task that may become particularly burdensome when policymakers and military leaders must carry out congressional dictates—such as allowing uniformed women the choice of wearing skirts or slacks, makeup, and earrings in an effort to preserve traditional notions of femininity or permitting Native Americans the

legal use of a hallucinogenic outside the limits of a military installation—while *not* affording the same accommodation to other cultural and religious groups with similar practices. Such seemingly arbitrary decisions may give rise to complaints of double standards, or they may be seen as denying desired cultural citizenship to military members from less-favored or less-visible minority and marginalized communities. Moreover, the presumption of inequity that underpins approval of some accommodation requests and not others may result in perceptions of favoritism, particularly among communities that have encouraged military service.

⁷One example of communal objection to the military's assimilative denial of cultural citizenship gained widespread attention in 2009, when two Sikh medical students, actively recruited by the Army, requested accommodation for their visible, religiously mandated grooming and apparel. When their requests were disapproved, the Sikh diaspora in the United States led a national campaign to highlight the Army's decision. The extended Sikh community was exhorted to solicit media coverage of this campaign and political intervention, and its success was illustrated by a letter, signed by 49 U.S. senators and congressmen, sent to Secretary of Defense Robert Gates in August (Congress, 2009), explicitly supporting the Sikhs. Two months later, the Army relented, granting the accommodation request (Farrisee, 2009). Almost immediately, a Chabad Lubavitch rabbi filed a request for accommodation of his Orthodox Jewish grooming standards as he pursues a commission as an Army chaplain (Ain, 2010).

⁸In 1996, for example, Congress approved the use of peyote, a mild hallucinogenic, by Native American servicemembers when engaged in tribal worship; no other faith groups, however, even those with similar sacramental requirements, may use peyote or any other controlled substance. Similarly, a 1987 law passed by Congress allows servicemembers to wear religious headgear; the Services typically have allowed only the Jewish yarmulke to be worn openly.

⁹The reasons are threefold. First, DoD's policy focus on near absolute uniformity as a measure of mission capability poses significant barriers to meaningful accommodation of cultural differences. Second, even when permitted to accommodate cultural differences, some DoD and congressional decision-makers may act out of personal prejudice (Silk, 1999; Tomasic, 2010). Third, policymakers may legitimately be wary of charges of favoritism when considering and approving accommodation requests or permanent policy changes on behalf of some minority groups but not others.

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