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Intersecting Identities: Race, Military Affiliation, and Youth Attitudes towards War

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RESEARCH HIGHLIGHTS

- African Americans have a tradition of long and distinguished military service. However, among civilians, African Americans typically oppose the Iraq and Afghanistan wars more than other racial/ethnic groups in the United States. However, affiliation with the U.S. military has been shown to be associated with stronger support for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Given the difference in attitudes, this paper seeks to understand African Americans at the intersection of the U.S. military and their larger cultural attitudes on whether the U.S. should go to war or not.
- To understand the experiences of African Americans in the military, Patricia Hill Collins’ theory of intersectionality is adopted in this article. The theory of intersectionality stresses that race, class, and gender intersect and reinforce each other, and are not mutually exclusive domains.
- African Americans affiliated with the military appear to have a unique perspective on these wars; they appear to support the wars more than their civilian peers, but less than their white military counterparts. The authors offer other reasons for the higher support among African Americans in the service, such as those joining the service coming from more conservative families who are more supportive of war.
- African American service members have been in service to the U.S. since Colonial times; yet, they experienced de jure segregation until the end of the Korean War and relative de facto segregation thereafter. This study shows that racial and military status intersect, shaping each person’s attitude towards war.
- Future research is needed to compare differences in views between officer and enlisted service members, and cross-national differences between countries with volunteer and conscript military forces. Further, assessments of further intersectionality dimensions are needed especially comparing African-American men and women in the military.

ABSTRACT

“African-Americans in the U.S. military encompass at least two distinct identity groups: a racial status associated with lower support for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and a military status which tends to be more ‘hawkish’ in perspective. This study examines the intersection of these two status characteristics utilizing survey data of American military academy cadets, Reserve Officer Training Corp (ROTC) cadets, and civilian students (n = 5,051). Majorities of military cadets, regardless of race, supported both of these wars more than their civilian counterparts, but African-Americans are significantly less supportive of the wars relative to their peers within each group. African-American cadets support both wars less so than whites and cadets of other races, but African-American cadets supported both wars more than African-American civilians. It appears that racial and military affiliations combine to yield a unique perspective on war, adapting elements of both statuses. These findings support the concept of intersectionality.”

IMPLICATIONS

FOR PRACTICE

These findings show that behaviors and beliefs are shaped by the intersection of social statuses (race and military). Servicemembers with multiple statuses should continue to embrace their diverse views and recognize that their unique beliefs and behaviors strengthen the armed forces. These findings could serve as reassurance to service members with less “hawkish” views on war, reminding them that they are not alone in their identity/ies and beliefs. Servicemembers with multiple statuses and views should consider seeking counseling to discuss their views. Seeking counseling could be beneficial to the individual as a service member and a civilian. Counselors and healthcare professionals should be mindful that servicemembers can have multiple statuses that shape their views on war, and that their views on war might differ from those of their colleagues. Counselors should use this study as a model to show their service member clients that people with unique statuses in society have long been a part of the military and contribute greatly to its mission and goal.

FOR POLICY

The DoD might continue to encourage diversity within the armed services. The DoD and policymakers might closely examine the organizational costs of the war, comparing specific racial and ethnic groups, to understand how and why certain groups have reacted differently to the wars. Given the changes in African American enlistment over the past decade, policymakers might allocate funds to study the changing trend of African American enlistment in the armed forces. Given the difference in beliefs on war, the VA might offer non-judgmental spaces for African American veterans and veterans belonging to other groups to discuss their experiences and beliefs.

FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

These findings can inform future studies of other groups with unique characteristics. For example, future researchers could use these findings to better understand the behaviors and beliefs of homosexuals in the military. Given the full inclusion of homosexuals into the armed services with the end of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell”, LGBTQs in the armed forces are likely to have the same intersectionality as African Americans in the armed forces. Thus, it would be beneficial to compare the behaviors of servicemembers and civilians who identify as LGBTQ. If this study can be applied to other groups and statuses in the population, the authors believe it might suggest that increasing the types of people in the military will change the nature of the institution for the better. The authors found that whites and some other races who were serving in the armed forces often supported war quite easily. Future researchers should examine how a servicemember’s desire to finish a military related mission shapes and strengthens his/her beliefs on war. To further examine how group identity shapes the individual identity of servicemembers, social identity theory should be applied. Future research should continue to examine how race intersects with military service, not only in the U.S, but in other nations as well.

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