Acceptance of Transgender Veterans in Social Settings: An Experimental Study
Andrea Tremblay, Justina M. Oliveira*, and Kayla Pinard
Department of Psychology, Southern New Hampshire University

ABSTRACT. U.S. society has become more exposed to and aware of the issues facing veterans who identify as transgender, but there is limited research surrounding this topic and the levels of acceptance society has of these individuals in social settings. With the growing “out” transgender population and changing views within political and military realms on transgender identities, there are concerns for the mental health and equal treatment of these individuals. This experimental study examined how participants reacted to a scenario in which they met a veteran in a social setting who shared a similar hobby (conditions: someone who either self-discloses they are transgender or an identical scenario except with no self-disclosure of transgender identity). This study explored the psychological attitudes that may impact these judgements and examined participants’ expected future behavior regarding the extent to which they would want further contact with that person. Results regarding likability were in the opposite direction hypothesized, such that participants reported the individual to be more likable in the condition where the person self-disclosed their transgender identity compared to the condition where transgender identity was not indicated, $t(120) = -2.87$, $p = .005$, $d = 0.52$. Perceptions of similarity and willingness to spend more time with the person were not significantly different across conditions. These results suggest more positive attitudes toward transgender veterans than initially expected, which is surprising and also promising for future research with the veteran transgender community, yet future research to further understand how generalizable these findings are may be critical.

Keywords: transgender, veterans, social settings, bias, likability

Public awareness revolving around experiences of individuals in the transgender community has grown in the past decade compared to years past but requires further research to examine how people who identify as transgender are perceived in various specific settings. For example, research surrounding this topic and the levels of society’s acceptance of these individuals in social settings is still limited, as is research about transgender veterans’ experiences. The term cisgender is “used to describe an individual whose gender identity and gender expression align with the sex assigned at birth,” whereas the term transgender is “an umbrella term encompassing those whose gender identities or gender roles differ from those typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth” (A glossary: Defining transgender terms, 2018, p. 32). Thus, the term transgender or gender nonconforming is used to identify several groups within the transgender community. The word
Acceptance of Transgender Veterans described the immense amount of discrimination equality of these individuals. Stieglitz (2010) concerns about the health, mental stability, and ing as transgender on the rise, there are growing group, thus providing some sense of belonging. by their peers there than they may be outside of that because they may be more accepted and welcomed to individuals who are part of a minority group experience during adolescence can be valuable the outgroup. However, having a positive ingroup bond the group, this ingroup bias can become negative if their ingroup is disparaging toward members of the outgroup. The effects of this outcome can positive and negative, depending on the context. Although most people have more positive attitudes toward their ingroup and this can help bond the group, this ingroup bias can become negative if their ingroup is disparaging toward the outgroup. However, having a positive ingroup experience during adolescence can be valuable to individuals who are part of a minority group because they may be more accepted and welcomed by their peers there than they may be outside of that group, thus providing some sense of belonging.

With the number of people openly identifying as transgender on the rise, there are growing concerns about the health, mental stability, and equality of these individuals. Stieglitz (2010) described the immense amount of discrimination...
members. An advantage of the growth of the “out” transgender population in the military is that potentially more support will be provided for those within the community by other members. Barr et al. (2016) described that seeing oneself as transgender can increase one’s sense of pride and connection to the transgender community. They demonstrated this through several studies, which found that sense of belonging connected to one’s identity can bolster these individuals’ perceptions of having a connection to the community itself. The authors suggested this may lead to a better understanding of the transgender community overall and may force the world to adjust to a new normal.

Although there have been improvements in the treatment of individuals in sexual minority communities, a limited number of studies examined the public’s perceptions and acceptance levels of transgender veterans in social settings. Some of the most recent improvements include the Supreme Court ruling in June 2020, clarifying that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is also applicable to banning discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, and there is also increasing research revolving around issues relevant to this population. However, some recent studies have suggested an ongoing bias against the transgender community, such as Callahan and Zukowski’s study (2019), which demonstrated that cisgender individuals’ reactions of transgender individuals using public bathrooms were that they felt transgender people should use the restroom of their birth sex over that of their gender identity and that they personally would feel uncomfortable sharing a bathroom with someone identifying as transgender.

Regarding existing research on sexual minority communities in the military, a large portion of existing studies have focused mostly on lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) military service members and did not include the transgender community (e.g., Evans et al., 2019). Evans et al. (2019) indicated that LGB veterans who do not live “out” openly have higher psychological distress, elevated minority stress, disrupted interpersonal relationships, and a higher prevalence of mental health disorders. Their study also stated that the concealment of an LGB preference negatively affects unit cohesion and that revealing to others personal information such as LGB status has a positive effect on unit cohesion. Studies such as Evans et al.’s (2019) are useful in helping to understand transgender individuals’ experiences within the military. Nonetheless, it is also still necessary to further understand how other individuals, especially civilians, perceive the transgender military community in social settings, as this present study does.

One of the few studies that did research acceptance levels for sexual minorities in a military setting versus a civilian setting by cisgender individuals demonstrated a drastic difference in perceptions across the two groups (Coronges et al., 2013). In Coronges et al.’s (2013) study, the two cohorts consisted of United States military cadets compared to civilian college students. Cadets in this study were more likely to believe in banning LGB individuals from serving in the military compared to civilian students. More specifically, male Republican cadets were most opposed to LGB service members, whereas female civilian Democrats were the least likely to oppose LGB service members. However, the study did not evaluate the reasoning for lower levels of LGB acceptance by military cadets, nor the higher levels by civilians.

In an attempt to understand the reasons some individuals hold gender biases and others are more accepting, Parco et al. (2016) focused on an individual who was transitioning while working in a military environment. This transition and the study occurred prior to the “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” Act repeal. The “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” Act prohibited any lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) individual from serving in the military. This individual was not a service member, but was working as a civilian contractor in an office setting. The individual identified as transgender in the sense that they were transitioning from male to female. The study followed the individual for several months and conducted interviews with the individual, the individual’s command leadership, the individual’s coworkers, and various individuals within the same unit who may or may not have had any contact with that person. The study showed that most people who were interviewed were supportive of the individual. There were some military personnel who did not fully understand the situation or were just against it personally, but no violence ever occurred.

Participating in a group is important to an individual’s identity, especially after a major change (Amiot et al., 2007). A prime example would be immigrants in a new host nation. Immigrants come from certain customs, traditions, and social groups and have to adapt to the new environment by integrating into their new surroundings as best as they can. Meleady et al. (2020) supported this with four studies focused on hierarchy levels and open-mindedness among British adults. These
studies showed that there can be an increase in positivity in the environment along with having a higher tolerance for each other through intergroup contact. These findings demonstrate that change can occur within a society through intergroup contact to help shift how people view the world and social issues around them.

The same is true about coming out, which is an important step in an individual’s life to embrace their chosen path. In doing so, it may feel like a new world or understanding, but it is truly being able to affirm one’s identity. However, others’ unknown reactions and the fear this can cause, as well as dealing with the several risks and concerns involved in coming out as transgender, are factors that can still be daunting to many individuals. According to Katz-Wise and Budge (2015), this is an experience that many members of the LGBT community have dealt with at some point, especially in the United States where a cisgender individual is considered the majority and believed to be superior.

Matarazzo et al.’s (2014) study of suicide risk among the LGBT community, including transgender military personnel and veterans, also found that individuals within this community who have a strong support group (e.g., friends, family, or an LGBT group) have a lower risk of attempting suicide. This finding supported a recent study inquiring about similar implications. According to Tucker (2019), the risk of suicide-related thoughts and behaviors increases with stigma-related minority stressors, such as what transgender veterans may endure during and after their service. Access to transition-related medical care with veteran community support and connections may reduce the risk of suicide-related thoughts and behaviors. These findings are supported through multiple studies examining stress in transgender individuals. Meyer (2003) stated that sources of stress that lead to negative physical and mental issues consist of personal events and conditions in the social environment. Lehavot et al. (2016) further supported this finding with 212 transgender veterans, indicating 57% of individuals in the sample reported suicidal thoughts in the past year and 66% had either planned a suicide or had a suicide attempt. Not only did these results show high rates of suicidal thoughts and attempts, but they also demonstrated that these individuals faced stigma throughout their military service and later developed mental health disorders such as PTSD and depressive disorder, which are significant influences on suicidal ideation.

Another possible contributing factor to the low levels of mental health in this population is the fear of losing a close relationship and the connection one has with them. Baumeister and Leary (1995) observed that the connections individuals make with friends and other ingroups can seem spontaneous and/or appear to lack obvious advantages. However, they indicated that relationships often occur fairly naturally and individuals put effort and time into these relationships, which they find supportive. Not only could losing a connection like that hurt an individual emotionally, but it could also lower the number of supportive people they have access to.

One method to lower the negative effects of discrimination for transgender and gender-nonconforming individuals is to get support from social workers or social-service organizations, according to Klein et al. (2018). A study by these authors investigating discrimination against transgender individuals in social-service settings showed some disturbing results. The findings suggested that services created to mitigate the effects of racism and transphobia could be increasing discrimination. There could also be stress created by psychological and social discrimination. This can cause significant issues for a transgender individual. Budge et al. (2013) explained that social support can influence a transgender individual’s transition. Coping, well-being, and smoothness of transition are essential processes of transitioning, which can be affected by how others interact with the individual.

Although there is increasing public advocacy for veterans in the transgender community, the low prevalence of research conducted on their experiences during social interactions must be remedied. The small number of existing studies in this domain gives an indication of the difficulties facing those identifying as transgender or gender nonconforming. Transgender acceptance has interested the first author for several years. The initial idea for studying acceptance levels in a social setting grew from her experiences transitioning, including before, during, and after her time in the military. She found more acceptance through her military connections than through family or civilian friends. Therefore, our study sought to further this body of research. This study seems to be one of the first studies published in English about perceptions of transgender military veterans in social settings. Based on prior research, we set forth the following hypotheses.

H1: Participants in the condition where the individual self-discloses that they identify as being
transgender would perceive this individual to be less likable compared to those in the condition where the individual does not self-disclose this.

H2: Participants in the condition where the individual self-discloses that they identify as being transgender would perceive this individual as less similar to them compared to those in the condition where the individual does not self-disclose this.

H3: Participants in the condition where the individual self-discloses that they identify as being transgender would be less likely to report willingness to spend more time with this individual compared to those in the condition where the individual does not self-disclose this.

H4a–c: Participants’ scores on the Attitudes Towards Transgender Individuals Scale would predict their scores on (a) perceived likability and (b) similarity, as well as (c) their willingness to spend more time with this individual in the experimental condition (condition in which the individual self-discloses they identify as transgender).

**Method**

After institutional review board approval from Southern New Hampshire University (#2018-093), participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions (62 participants were in each condition): a transgender condition and a nontransgender condition. Once assigned a condition, participants read a hypothetical description of a person they met through a shared hobby. The selected hobby was exercise, and through a conversation, the participants discovered that the individual is a veteran. They found a shared interest in music as well. Within the description, the individual either was explicitly described as transgender or not (depending on the assigned condition). Materials are available at https://osf.io/94kdb/. Participants then completed a questionnaire in which they made various evaluations about the individual (e.g., likeability and perceived similarity), followed by questions about participants’ attitudes toward individuals who are transgender and participants’ demographic information. Debriefing participants about the purpose of the study (to understand acceptance levels of individuals in social settings who identify as transgender) occurred at the end of the online survey. We analyzed data with SPSS through descriptive analyses, independent-samples t tests, and regression analyses to test for the impact of the condition on levels of acceptance, similarity, and intent to be in contact with that individual again.

**Participants**

Recruitment of participants via social media platforms and email resulted in a snowball sample. One hundred twenty-four people participated in this study through an online survey via Qualtrics. Participants’ ages ranged from 18 to 63 years old (M = 24.85, SD = 9.35). Participants were 76.6% women, 14.5% men, 4.8% chose not to indicate, and 4% stated other. Also, 20.2% identified as LGBTQ and 75% reported that they did not. European Americans made up 80.6% of the sample, 4.8% were Latino/a, 4.8% identified as “other” but did not specify, 4% chose not to answer this question, 3.2% of the sample were Asian American, 1.6% were African American, and 0.8% were Middle Eastern. Most participants were from the United States (94.4%). Of these, 97% were from the Northeast, 7% from the Midwest, 6% were from the Southeast, 3% from the West coast, and 3% from the Southwest regions of the U.S.

Sixty-two percent reported living in a suburban area, 35% reported living in a rural location, and 21% of participants reported living in an urban area. Most participants said they had not served in the military (87.1%), 8.1% stated that they had served, and 4.8% chose not to respond to this question. Out of the 8.1% who stated that they served, 5.6% stated they did so in the Marine Corps/Navy, 0.8% were in the Army, 0.8% were in Air Force, and 0.8% stated they were in the Coast Guard.

**Measures**

Measures of likability, perceptions of similarity, and the items on the Attitudes Toward Transgendered Individuals Scale were all on a 5-point Likert scale anchored from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) for our study. However, the original Attitudes Toward Transgendered Individuals Scale items were on a 7-point Likert-type scale anchored from 1 (strongly disagree) and 7 (strongly agree). We used a 5-point Likert scale for these items to be consistent with the response scale of the other items included in the study. Higher scores on all these measures represent higher perceptions of likability, similarity, and more positive attitudes toward transgender individuals.

**Likability**

The measure used for assessing the likability of the person in the scenario originates from the
Likability of Refuser scale from Cramwinckel et al. (2013; 12 items; \( \alpha = .93 \)). An example question is, “To what extent do you think the other participant is pleasant?”

**Similarity**

Items regarding perceptions of similarity with the person in the scenario (five items; \( \alpha = .87 \)) originates from the Perceived Values Similarity scale from Varma et al. (2011). An example question is, “I believe we would have similar personal values.”

**Attitudes Toward Transgendered Individuals**

Participants also completed the Attitudes Toward Transgendered Individuals Scale (Walch et al., 2012; 20 items; \( \alpha = .95 \)). Example questions are, “It would be beneficial to society to recognize transgenderism as normal” and “Transgenderism is immoral” (reverse scored).

**Likelihood to Spend More Time**

Participants also answered the following question about the person in the scenario: “Given the situation and all the information you know of this person, if this were a true experience, how likely is it that you would actually want to spend additional time getting to know this person?” This item was on a 5-point Likert scale anchored from 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely). A higher score represented higher levels of willingness to spend more time with this individual. A follow-up open-ended question asking participants to explain why they answered this item in the way they did was also included in this part of the survey, but left unanalyzed as it was not the focus of the present study.

**Demographics**

The demographic questions included items about participants’ race or ethnicity (White/European American, multiracial, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Latino/a, Native American, African American/Black, or the option of other), sexual identity (if they identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, questioning), gender identity (male, female, or other: specify how you self-identify), whether or not they live in the United States (which region if they did), their biological sex, and whether they live in an urban, rural, or suburban area.

**Results**

**Descriptive Statistics**

We examined all means, standard deviations, and alpha coefficients for each scale. For the Attitudes Toward Transgendered Individuals Scale (Walch et al., 2012), the mean and standard deviation were as follows: \( M = 4.35, SD = 0.74 \), with a reliability score estimate of \( \alpha = .95 \). The Likability Scale (Cramwinckel et al., 2013) had a mean of 4.11 overall \( (SD = 0.69) \) with a reliability score estimate of \( \alpha = .93 \). The scale about perceptions of similarity with the person in the scenario (Varma et al., 2011) had a mean of 3.58 \( (SD = 0.83) \), with a reliability score estimate of \( \alpha = .87 \).

**H1**

Transgender status had a significant effect on perceptions of likability, \( t(120) = -2.87, p = .005, d = 0.52 \). An independent-samples \( t \) test showed that, for the condition with the transgender individual \( (M = 4.28, SD = 0.74) \), participants actually reported higher levels of likability compared to the nontransgender condition \( (M = 3.93, SD = 0.58) \), which is opposite of what we predicted, yet very important to the limited research examining attitudes toward transgender individuals in social settings.

**H2**

Transgender status did not have a significant effect on perceptions of similarity, \( t(122) = -1.81, p = .07, d = 0.32 \). An independent-samples \( t \) test showed that, for the condition with the transgender individual \( (M = 3.71, SD = 0.87) \), participants reported higher levels of similarity to them compared to the nontransgender condition \( (M = 3.45, SD = 0.78) \). This result is the opposite of what we predicted.

**H3**

An independent-samples \( t \) test showed that transgender status had no effect on willingness to spend more time with the person \( t(122) = -0.31, p = .76, d = 0.06 \) across the nontransgender condition \( (M = 3.26, SD = 0.87) \) and transgender condition \( (M = 3.31, SD = 0.90) \), thus demonstrating no support for H3.

**H4a-c**

Tests for these hypotheses were done with regression analyses. For those in the transgender identifying condition, participants’ scores on the Attitudes Towards Transgender Individuals Scale significantly predicted their scores on H4a regarding their perceptions of the person as likable, \( t(57) = 2.09, p = .04 \), and accounted for a significant proportion of variance in likability scores, \( R^2 = .07, F(1, 57) = 4.36, p = .04 \). The scores on this scale also predicted participants’ scores on H4b regarding their perceptions of similarity with the individual, \( t(57) = 2.89, p = .01 \).
for a significant proportion of variance in this
in the scenario, \( t(57) = 2.46, p = .02 \), and accounted
for a significant proportion of variance in this
likelihood to spend time item, \( R^2 = .10, F(1, 57) = 6.03, p = .02 \). Thus, H4a–c were all supported.

**Discussion**

**Implications of Findings and Limitations**

There is an interesting pattern when comparing the
nontransgender and the transgender conditions in
reference to likeability and attitudes. Participants
in the transgender condition had more positive
attitudes toward the individual compared to those
in the nontransgender condition, such that per-
ceived likability was significantly higher. This could
suggest less prejudiced against veterans identifying
as transgender. Yet, several studies show drastically
different results for lesbian, gay, and bisexual
individuals (e.g., Coronges et al., 2013), so this is
unlikely to be the case for transgender individuals
in the United States population at large. Although
we found that participants reported higher likability
in the condition in which the individual identified
as transgender compared to the condition in which
the individual did not identify as transgender, which
was opposite of what we predicted, it is possible
that our sample is not generalizable. This study
consisted of a sample of mostly European American
women in their 20s, and from the Northeast region
of the United States, which could have impacted
the results. Due to the participants originating
from social media and contacts of the authors, who
are either in the LGBTQ+ community or allies of
the community, the participants may have been
skewed in favor of accepting a transgender veteran.
Therefore, our findings may not generalize to the
population across the United States; the level of
diversity did not allow for a true sample of each
demographic. The snowball sample through the
authors’ social media may have also limited
the exposure of participants due to the authors being
members or advocates of the LGBTQ community.

Additionally, the nature of the hypothetical
scenario in the study might have impacted particip-
ants’ impressions of the target individual, making
them more or less likable, depending on the
participants’ preferences. For example, if they did
not find the scenario realistic to them personally
because they do not often go to the gym, etc., this
could have impacted the perceived realism of the
study. Future studies could utilize multiple avenues
to gauge the opinions of transgender individuals,
including both self-reports as in this study, but also
with an Implicit Attitudes Test. This may further
the understanding of individuals’ true perceptions
of transgender veterans in social settings because it
is possible that participants in this study still held
implicit biases against the transgender community
even if they reported low explicit biases. This study
was only distributed to English speaking individuals,
mostly from the United States. Other countries’
governments and populations differ on this topic,
shown by the open acceptance of transgender individuals in serving in the military.

Demand characteristics may also be affecting
the results in our study. Participants in the United
States at this time are likely to know that explicitly
reporting to dislike or not wanting to spend more
time with someone in a hypothetical scenario who
identified as transgender is exclusive and viewed
negatively, so participants, especially in that condi-
tion, might have felt they should respond in a
positive way. Lastly, the results might have differed
if the transgender identity preceded the veteran
status. Further research could determine if the
aforementioned variables impact perceptions of
transgender or gender nonconforming individuals.

However, it is possible of course that the
results are generalizable. If this is the case, it would
indicate that United States society may be more
accepting of individuals from this community than
prior research has suggested (especially given the
high suicide rates for this population), which is
hopeful. Serious concerns and day-to-day issues
still need addressing for this community to receive
more equality, and further research on attitudes in
other realms (e.g., the workplace, current military
personnel) will benefit this community greatly.

**Conclusion**

Because this was one of the first studies to investi-
gate the likability of veterans in the transgender
community within social settings, the outcomes
showed some potentially promising results. No
analyzed data supported the expected hypotheses,
which if representative of the United States popula-
tion as a whole, would be positive for gender minority
communities. Although future research will
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enhance our comprehension of this topic, this study was an important step toward understanding the daily experiences of transgender individuals and more specifically, the experiences of transgender veterans, as well as the perceptions of those interacting in social settings with people who identify as part of this population.

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Author Note. Andrea Tremblay @ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3389-347X

Justina M. Oliveira @ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3029-6573

We have no conflict of interest to disclose. Materials are available at https://osf.io/94kdb/

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Andrea Tremblay at andrea.tremblay22@gmail.com or Justina M. Oliveira at j.oliveira@snhu.edu.
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