



Patriotism as a Construct for Understanding Military Service Among LGBTQ+ Veterans: A Call for Research Grounded in Institutional Oppression

VANESSA MEADE 

SPECIAL COLLECTION:
PATRIOTISM

RESEARCH


VIRGINIA TECH.
PUBLISHING

ABSTRACT

LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, with the + including Two-Spirit, Intersex, Asexual, and additional sexual orientations and gender identities) people have always had an important role in military service in the United States. However, this service has never received broad-based recognition and was, too often, criminalized. Since the repeal of the Don't Ask Don't Tell Policy that went into effect in 2011, and the recent second revocation of the ban of transgender personnel serving in the military in January 2021, very little research has occurred with LGBTQ+ veterans. There is a compelling need to explore LGBTQ+ veterans' experiences and their complicated relationship, both historically and currently, with military service. This article explores patriotism as a construct to discuss the LGBTQ+ military veterans' experience, how their experiences are overlooked in veterans' literature, and how military service affects LGBTQ+ veterans in a country with a long history of oppression and discrimination against LGBTQ+ people. It also provides a framework useful in exploring patriotism and other issues from the LGBTQ+ perspective and how their experiences in the military shape their lives now as veterans.

CORRESPONDING AUTHOR:
Vanessa Meade

University of Alaska Anchorage,
US

vmeade@alaska.edu

KEYWORDS:

LGBTQ+; Veterans; Patriotism;
sexual orientation; gender
diversity

TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Meade, V. (2021). Patriotism as
a Construct for Understanding
Military Service Among LGBTQ+
Veterans: A Call for Research
Grounded in Institutional
Oppression. *Journal of Veterans
Studies*, 7(3), pp. 38–45. DOI:
[https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.
v7i3.261](https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v7i3.261)

Available data estimated that there are more than one million LGBTQ+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning, with the + including Two-Spirit, Intersex, Asexual and additional sexual orientations and gender identities) veterans in the United States (US Department of Veterans Affairs, 2016). A 2013 study, still relevant in research due to it being a large-scale study that focused on the number of transgender veterans in the United States, also reports approximately 20% of transgender people have served in the military (Herman & Harrison-Quintana, 2013). LGBTQ+ people serving in the military have navigated changing military policy for many years, including the 2017 reversal of an Obama-era policy on transgender people serving openly in the military. Although the ban was lifted again in January 2021, the rights of all LGBTQ+ service members and veterans are precarious and can fluctuate among national leaders.

There is also little public awareness and understanding about the Supreme Court decision that banned discrimination of LGBTQ+ people in the workforce because discrimination violates Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, by extending the scope of sexual discrimination in the Civil Rights Act to include sexual orientation and gender identity; however, it does not provide protections for military personnel (Barnes, 2020; Kenney, 2020). The longstanding and intersecting effects of homophobia, transphobia, heterosexism, sexual and gender discrimination, and racism without a ban on discrimination for LGBTQ+ people in the military workplace, are detrimental to the well-being of those who serve and could affect in negative ways the duration of service, quality of life during service, and life after military service as veterans (Mark et al., 2019).

With a long history of discrimination against LGBTQ+ people in the military, compounded by limited research about LGBTQ+ veterans, this article explores the relevance of patriotism as a construct for LGBTQ+ veterans' experience as a marginalized group and the complexities of their relationship to patriotism in the military and after service, as veterans. This exploration can assist in identifying ways LGBTQ+ veterans and their experiences can inform the narrative of what patriotism means in the LGBTQ+ and larger veteran community and if patriotism is an essential aspect of service for LGBTQ+ people or in their lives as veterans.

With little research about LGBTQ+ veterans, particularly since the repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT), this article also identifies research questions and suggests a framework for further study. With a lack of research about the LGBTQ+ veteran community and particularly for this article, patriotism in the LGBTQ+ veteran community—we need to develop a framework to ensure the inclusion of the LGBTQ+ narrative in identifying the impact of patriotism on

service and/or the “veteran experience.” In understanding LGBTQ+ experiences, we also broaden the veteran narrative that extends beyond the heteronormative perspective and stereotypes of veteran identity and experience, including those of patriotic service.

PATRIOTISM AS A CONSTRUCT

Patriotism can be defined both individually and collectively. A working definition from a memo by the developers of the Patriotism Scale and Nationalism Scales in 1987 defined patriotism as a “Deeply felt affective attachment to the nation” (p. 1). The authors go on to say patriotism is distinctive from nationalism, “which may be thought of as feelings of superiority of one’s own country vis-à-vis other countries” (Johnston Conover & Feldman, 1987, p. 1). Also, In *What Unites Us: Reflections on patriotism*, Dan Rather (2019) wrote:

It is important not to confuse “patriotism” with “nationalism.” As I define it, nationalism is a monologue in which you place your country in a position of moral and cultural supremacy over others. Patriotism, while deeply personal, is a dialogue with your fellow citizens, and a larger world, about not only what you love about your country but also how it can be improved. Unchecked nationalism leads to conflict and war. Unbridled patriotism can lead to the betterment of society. Patriotism is rooted in humility. Nationalism is rooted in arrogance. (p. 15)

Efforts to review the literature about LGBTQ+ veterans and patriotism produced only one article focusing on patriotism specific to the LGBTQ+ veteran community. The article by Fischer (2016) is an important critique of the treatment of the Chelsea Manning case, a transgender woman that served in the military and was convicted of violations of the Espionage Act in 2010. It expands the meaning of homonationalism, including transpatriotism, transnormativity, and its role in adherence to the gender binary.

Homonationalism, transpatriotism, and transnormativity are terms and concepts critical of reinforcing heteronormative values, gender binaries, racism, and elitism within the LGBTQ+ community that support the existing hierarchy legitimizing inclusivity for privileged populations and identities while excluding others (Fischer, 2016; Puar, 2013). As we as a country grapple with our history of oppression and discrimination, including what patriotism means concerning our history and its impact on our

present, these concepts along with others, can be essential to examine within the military and our relationship with the rest of the world. What role, if any, does patriotism play in reinforcing the oppression of others, given our history as a country and particularly for the purposes of this article, LGBTQ+ veterans?

A 2020 research article about patriotism in military service, not specific to LGBTQ+ veterans, suggested that patriotism is often not a significant reason people offer for rationalizing their service in the military (Krebs & Ralston, 2020). The article also discussed how patriotism was more of a factor for people enlisting in the military after the September 11, 2001 (09/11), terrorist attacks; more people reported patriotism as a reason to enlist. The article also states how the effects of 09/11 on patriotic enlistment have waned in the 20 years since those attacks. It's also important to note the increase in patriotism that was seen nationally after 09/11, occurred at a time when LGBTQ+ people were unable to serve openly in the military.

This collective patriotism affecting enlistment in military service of the Post 9/11 generation of service members and veterans, included LGBTQ+ people's service. Yet, we still have extremely limited research to understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ people's service in the military and after as veterans, particularly when they were also not able to serve openly, and if patriotism was indeed a factor for their service, as well as what patriotism means to them as service members and veterans now.

Also described within the Krebs & Ralston (2020) article was the distinct difference in perceptions of patriotism by civilians and family members of service members and those in military service. In context, military members did not report patriotism as a predominant factor for joining the military; however, civilians and the family members of service members said patriotism was a principal reason people served (Krebs & Ralston, 2020). It is also important to note that few studies about patriotism in military service and its effects on military service can be generalized due to limited research. This gap includes exploring the construct of patriotism and military member's service and the impact of their engagement or lack of engagement in services and society as a veteran.

What is missing in the LGBTQ+ veteran's research is the exploration of the effects of long-term discrimination from the same systems that, due to recent policy changes, quickly shifted to serving LGBTQ+ veterans and without acknowledging the effects of the past harm that this population has incurred. This lack of acknowledgment and/or systemic shift without acknowledgment of harm and wrongdoing, negates the collective experiences LGBTQ+ veterans had while serving in the military and after their service as veterans.

One group's superiority over others has been at the heart of issues related to LGBTQ+ people's service and many other social justice issues in the military and American history; this population has a shared history (from the beginning of military service), of being forced to hide and deny who we are or face decades-long threats or the reality of being discharged or jailed for being LGBTQ+, which has left a deep psychological wound that goes unappreciated within literature, policy, and practice. Due to the experiences of oppression and a complicated relationship with military service, this view of patriotism may not necessarily fit the LGBTQ+ experience. Yet, we have little context to begin from. While LGBTQ+ people have served in many generations and eras of military service, the research and narratives of service members and veterans have only recently allowed the LGBTQ+ experiences to be included. This is where our work of inclusion continues. Queer theory has rarely been applied to veteran research to provide additional constructs for research with LGBTQ+ veterans or to develop a framework for exploring LGBTQ+ veterans' experiences in the context of patriotism and service. Research that has been conducted with LGBTQ+ veterans has often also failed to include the resilience and strengths of LGBTQ+ service members and veterans while functioning in an anti-LGBTQ+ environment (Ramirez & Sterzing, 2017).

As we consider what it means to be patriotic as a country after the recent insurrection resulting in the occupation of the U.S. Capitol building on January 6th, 2021, and the changing political climate of the past decade, LGBTQ+ people have had a particularly long struggle with how they view and are viewed for their military service (Estes, 2007; Shilts, 2005). While very little research exists about veterans' views and connection with patriotism in the literature, there are even fewer examples of research with the concept of patriotism among LGBTQ+ veterans. As the definition of what constitutes a "patriot" expands through the policy that includes all people, instead of only straight white male cis-gendered people, patriotism can be explored as an evolving term with more inclusive perspectives informing its meaning and context. Indeed, one of the principal issues involved in considering patriotism among LGBTQ+ people is how their own experiences of oppression influence their motivation to serve their country, which has historically been and remains a source of oppression.

Through a shift of social and political ideals, including more acceptance of LGBTQ+ people as reflected in LGBTQ+ inclusion in military policy and veteran's services, as well as the increased political polarization in the U.S., questions emerge that demand exploration and systematic inquiry. These include: what does patriotism have to do with people's views of their service in a politically divided nation with different ideas of patriotism? How do LGBTQ+ veterans

view patriotism with and because of their service? Can the military as an entity, and often the leading edge of social change in our country as a microcosm of our society, and the veterans who have served in the military, pave the way for the country to embrace a changing definition of patriotism and embrace a more inclusive acceptance of diverse expressions of what it means to be a patriot? Ultimately, what does being patriotic mean, and do various groups within society embrace diverse meanings?

While there is no universally agreed-upon definition of patriotism, the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people serving openly in the military also allows LGBTQ+ people, for the first time in our history, to speak openly about our experiences and beliefs as service members and veterans.

Research can uncover the perspectives of LGBTQ+ people concerning why they served, including if patriotism is an essential aspect of their service, to develop further military and veterans' supportive social and healthcare, and improve health outcomes for LGBTQ+ veterans.

INTERSECTIONS OF SUBGROUP IDENTITY IN MILITARY SERVICE

There are distinct differences between lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer communities and the issues they face. Knowing these differences, we can also use existing research on LGBTQ+ people in civilian populations to explore specific aspects of LGBTQ+ military service (Pew Research Center, 2013). Considerations can also include information from the 2015 RAND Research Brief, which provides the first estimate of the number of LGBT people in the military and a first of its kind study of LGBT service members' health behaviors (Meadows et al., 2018). In this report, 6.1% of service members identified as LGBT. The highest percentage was in the Navy at 9.1%, and the lowest was in the Marine Corps at 4.4%. Enlisted people in the lowest pay rates had the highest identification with being LGBT at 8.4%, and the highest officer pay rates had the lowest number identifying as LGBT at 2.7%. Females had higher percentages in the LGBT subgroups at 16.6%, and 4.2% reported being male. The Marine Corps also had the highest rate of bisexual women serving in its ranks at 18%. Service members who identified as transgender were .06% of the study population (Meadows et al., 2018).

Overall, the military is also younger than the civilian population. Also, an aspect to note is that most enlisted people are under 24 when joining the military. In 2018, over 60% of Marines, the branch of service with the highest percentage of young service members, were between 17 and 24 (Meadows et al., 2018). The fact that this age range intersects with sexual and gender identity as a

developmental process could be another important area of focus in veterans' studies in identity formation. Finally, as we look at patriotism, are there generational differences in eras of service about patriotism? What is patriotic within the military and veteran community, and how has military culture recently shifted towards being more inclusive of what service and patriotism mean?

GAPS IN LGBTQ+ VETERAN RESEARCH

It is essential to note the abundance of research that has missed capturing the views and experiences among LGBTQ+ veteran views, particularly since the repeal of DADT. Because of the long history of serving in silence and only being able to serve openly within the past decade, and for transgender people since January 2021, LGBTQ+ veterans' experiences are often missing or viewed with a limited scope in research. Usually, the research conducted is with LGBTQ individuals utilizing US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) or Veterans Health Administration (VHA) services, focused on risk-factors and identify barriers to care (Lira & Chandrasekar, 2020), but this research excludes talking to veterans about their experiences of discrimination, and the impacts of the bans from service on their lives now, their views of their service, as well as a lack of focus on utilizing resiliency factors as suggested by Colpitts & Gahagan (2016).

What does exist more frequently are interviews with lesbian and gay service members about their military experiences, while many of these interviews were conducted before the repeal of Don't Ask Don't Tell (DADT) and before transgender military service members were allowed to serve openly. The Library of Congress has one of the most comprehensive digital libraries of interviews with LGBTQ+ veterans. These interviews explore the work that lesbian and gay people did in the military during their time in service, where they served, and can also be a source of information for learning more about the experiences of lesbian and gay people. These interviews were conducted by Steve Estes and became the book *Ask and Tell: Gay and Lesbian Veterans Speak Out*. This book was released in 2007, before the repeal of DADT in 2010, and outlines some of the issues that people experienced pre-DADT and during the years DADT was Policy in the military. The 50 people interviewed share a wide range of experiences and stories. Some veterans talked about feeling isolated and unable to talk about their personal lives with others when that is a common way for people in the military to share. Some people spoke of changing the pronouns of their partners when they talked about them to appear heterosexual and being unable to attend unit social functions with their

families due to being outed as an LGBTQ+ person. Others described being unable to continue to serve due to DADT and feeling as though they were living a lie. They also spoke of their pride in their service and the people who supported them as they served (Estes, 2007).

In the 2005 book *Conduct Unbecoming: Gays & Lesbians in the U.S. Military*, Randy Shilts also took a comprehensive look at the history and experiences of lesbian and gay service members and veterans. He interviewed over 1,500 people for the book, including 150 active duty members, and explored the narratives of lesbian and gay service members. To date, this seminal work is the most comprehensive narrative history of the lesbian and gay military experience. Still, due to the time when it was written and the focus of the work, it leaves out the experiences of bisexual, transgender, and other gender identities. However, important aspects of this book include the narrative experiences of discrimination and oppression that people experienced pre-DADT, the historical context for the lesbian and gay community and service through different eras of peacetime and war, as well as setting the framework for a repeal of an outdated and discriminatory military policy that barred LGBTQ+ people from military service (Shilts, 2005).

With the limited research in the over 10 years since DADT was repealed and the ban for transgender service members recently lifted in January 2021, we are missing a significant opportunity to research the impact of LGBTQ+ people's service and the effects of this change on veterans as well, including their views of patriotism, and their transition out of the military into civilian life. Indeed, it is at this transition (when LGBTQ+ military personnel enter civilian life) that the meaning of patriotism requires more illumination. Patriotism may very well be tied to serving others in civilian life, as LGBTQ+ veterans take what they learned from the military and apply it to helping others, particularly other LGBTQ+ veterans. The idea of caring about others, esprit de corps, community building and mutual support, and overcoming discriminatory practices in the community may be expressions of patriotism for LGBTQ+ people, but we do not really know about the importance of these as part of the veteran experience.

Factors contributing to the limited scope of research in LGBTQ+ veterans issues include how the military and the VA had little infrastructure or policies to work with LGBTQ+ people in their facilities and programs. Much of the past 10 years has focused on developing policy, programs, and services and educating and working with VA employees and service providers on LGBTQ+ veterans' issues. With the VA being the leading research organization in veterans' issues, this Policy, training, and program development has superseded research with LGBTQ+ veterans. The VA also

does not track issues that LGBTQ+ veterans face. It does not have a systematic and standard way to collect data about sexual orientation and self-identified gender identity (Government Accountability Office [GAO], 2020). There are no fields in electronic health records for providers to include these items in a veteran's record or to track issues across the VHA system affecting LGBTQ+ veterans.

The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) has no way to know how many LGBTQ+ veterans are in the VHA system. There is also currently no standard way for providers to ascertain information on gender identity or sexual orientation that allows researchers to analyze data systemically (GAO, 2020). Limited inclusion in research also leaves a blind spot in the LGBTQ+ experience of patriotism and the effects of patriotism on military service and veteran identity. We need to ensure we include the LGBTQ+ perspective in how we view concepts and the impact of all veterans' experiences instead of the traditional view of what a veteran and patriotism are. Can we expand the concept of patriotism to be inclusive of the experiences of oppression that LGBTQ people experienced in the military and their service despite it, also to be seen as a patriotic act after decades of not being allowed to serve openly? What is patriotism given the changing and shifting societal views of LGBTQ+ people and other marginalized populations?

THE COMPLEXITY OF PATRIOTISM AS AN LGBTQ+ VETERAN

In this paper, LGBTQ+ is utilized as the overarching term to discuss issues related to the community. As a member of the LGBTQ+ community, I also feel it's important to bring awareness to how intersectionality influences the experiences and views of LGBTQ+ veterans and service members. We often want to put people into categories that fail to facilitate our understanding and appreciation of diversity across experiences. The LGBTQ+ military and veteran community is very diverse, and in no way can this article cover every aspect of our community. The LGBTQ+ acronym that is utilized to describe the community is indicative of the diversity within our community, but also fails to include the experiences of race, immigration status, nationality, class, sex, other ways people are marginalized, and how these experiences intersect with the LGBTQ+ community.

My personal experiences as a veteran in the LGBTQ+ community, along with my work with other veterans, is consistent with the discussion about the limitations of LGBTQ+ veterans research within a changing society. We are underrepresented in research and in exploring what patriotism means, particularly through the lens of the

effects of systemic oppression and discrimination in the military towards LGBTQ+ veterans and the effects of that on our lives after military service. Does patriotism impact our willingness to receive services and benefits? Does the era in which an LGBTQ+ veteran served affect their view of patriotism and their service?

Further considerations in research about all LGBTQ+ veterans issues include the impact of discrimination on each of the populations within the LGBTQ+ veteran community and how to best help LGBTQ+ veterans heal from injustice, violence, marginalization and connect with the strengths within our community. With the limited knowledge, training, and research on LGBTQ+ issues in veterans services, how we also look at the impact of intersectional issues in the LGBTQ+ veteran community is extremely important. In their work on resilience with the LGBTQ+ population, Colpitts and Gahagan (2016) stressed, “an intersectional lens acknowledges the complex intersecting and compounding nature of marginalization, oppression, risk factors and their subsequent impacts of LGBTQ health across the life course” (p. 6). Each person has a distinct history and implications for research. To view veterans through a focus on only one population within the LGBTQ+ community would limit the scope and depth of the issues we have experienced in military service and the impact of oppression in our lives collectively, as distinct groups within our community, and as individuals.

I’ll expand on aspects of intersectionality to consider when researching LGBTQ+ veterans and the issues we face. Crenshaw (1989) coined the term intersectionality focusing on the intersecting effects of identity on experiences of oppression by people in systems and institutions. For example, a Black woman serving in the military who is lesbian may have a different experience in her service because of the intersection of racism and homophobia.

Some other considerations in LGBTQ+ populations include the intersections of racism, sexism, transphobia, homophobia and how these overlap with sexual orientation and gender identities. Aspects for further research that may be important to explore for LGBTQ+ service members and veterans could include where LGBTQ+ people joined the military (e.g., urban, suburban, rural); their era of service and how it intersects with historical and current events in the LGBTQ+ movement; and how rank (enlisted or officer) and job title influenced and impacted their experiences as an LGBTQ+ service member.

Other intersections may include where they served (e.g., regionally, combat and non-combat duty assignments), their coming out experiences (were they out before or during military service and did they have support?), as well as individuals with disabilities and the impact of being LGBTQ+ on service-connected disabilities in the veteran

population. These experiences affect each subgroup differently as LGBTQ+ service members and veterans, particularly in areas where someone experienced trauma as an LGBTQ+ person. LGBTQ+ service members are at higher risk for violence, harassment, and sexual assault (Schuyler et al., 2020). Each of these aforementioned experiences and other intersections of identity and oppression could be important to investigate as we expand LGBTQ+ research and the inclusion of these veterans and their experiences in the larger veteran narrative. Also, the distinction of sexual orientation from gender identity as a separate but connected aspect of the LGBTQ+ community can be essential to explore in education and research. Intersectionality is often missing in studies and research about veterans, and centering it in our research about patriotism and other issues in veterans’ studies will assist in expanding knowledge about veterans’ issues.

Still, other factors also deserve attention, including how out a person is as an LGBTQ+ veteran. Being out as an LGBTQ+ person is not easily understood by people who are not part of the LGBTQ+ community. LGBTQ+ people are often outed to others by people they had talked to about their identity before they are ready to disclose their identity and the era in which they served, and policy that was in place when they served can also be a factor in understanding the experiences of LGBTQ+ people. Findings from one study show a trend towards being more open about being an LGBTQ+ person, while there are also differences between subgroups in their outness (McNamara et al., 2020). Also, McNamara et al. (2020) state, “Findings from the current study suggest that policy change alone, without assurances that being LGBT will not be held against them, may not be enough to fully integrate LGBT service members into the fighting force.” (p 20).

Developing research constructs and theories will be an essential next step in including other gender minorities in research and services. While significant changes have occurred for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ people in the military, research shows that many service members still fear retribution in promotions, duties and have concerns for safety in their lives (McNamara et al., 2020).

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

A good starting point for research grounded in the LGBTQ+ experience is for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) to establish systemic ways to collect and analyze data about the LGBTQ+ population. Now that it has been more than 10 years since the repeal of DADT, this needs to be implemented immediately. Because of the lack of data on LGBTQ+ servicemembers and veterans, we do not

know how many LGBTQ+ veterans are being served in the VHA or what kind of outreach needs to be done with this population for enrollment and/or health-related issues or the impact of the discrimination they faced while serving our country.

Additionally, the impact of military service on LGBTQ+ veterans' health is unknown, as are any possible strengths this population has in dealing with adversity as veterans. Additional considerations include looking at the experiences of LGBTQ+ veterans through the minority stress model (Meyer, 2003), which provides for LGBTQ+ differences and intersections of identity and experiences, and specifically how those intersect within the military culture. This could include the development of a model for working with military veterans where the systemic issues of discrimination and oppression experienced within subgroups are acknowledged and interventions and research address and explore the impact of oppression and discrimination on veteran's lives. In addition, researching resiliency to build on the strengths of the LGBTQ+ military and veteran community despite the adverse experiences many have had with discrimination and oppression in the military.

Also, our research must include the impact of patriotism on how people view their service if patriotism is a factor in healing from trauma-related experiences, what patriotism means to the LGBTQ+ veteran, and finally, why do LGBTQ+ people, who have and still experience oppression, still serve in the military? Does patriotism affect whether LGBTQ+ people leave or stay in military service? Answering these questions can assist us in looking at transitional services for LGBTQ+ veterans when they leave military service and help us understand the LGBTQ+ veteran and service member experience in ways we have never explored. Most of all, however, is the inquiry into such questions will validate the importance of military service for groups that have experienced systemic institutional oppression.

As we begin to understand the experiences of LGBTQ+ service members and veterans, we can also more fully understand the larger veteran narrative; including the meaning of patriotism for all veterans, instead of the historic invisibility, violence, and shame that has often been perpetrated against LGBTQ+ veterans and service members who have served our country. We can also understand connections between LGBTQ+ veterans and patriotism and assist them in accessing relevant services to address their needs and the benefits they have earned.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

AUTHOR AFFILIATION

Vanessa Meade  orcid.org/0000-0002-5006-2846
University of Alaska Anchorage, US

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE:

Meade, V. (2021). Patriotism as a Construct for Understanding Military Service Among LGBTQ+ Veterans: A Call for Research Grounded in Institutional Oppression. *Journal of Veterans Studies*, 7(3), pp. 38–45. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/jvs.v7i3.261>

Submitted: 18 May 2021 Accepted: 21 October 2021 Published: 02 November 2021

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