Race Relations Within the US Military

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Abstract
Sociologists now often say that the US military is a model of good race relations. Although there is no denying progress made in military race relations, especially since establishment of the all-volunteer force, this review challenges that comfortable claim as research done over the past two decades supports it only in part. Instead, we conclude that disparities in military allocations of goods and burdens sometimes disadvantage racial minorities. This conclusion rests on a review of institutional analyses in five arenas to which researchers have paid close attention: racial patterns in enlistment, officer promotion rates, administration of military justice, risk of death in combat, and health care for wounded soldiers. Although not a direct or intended result of military policy and practice, in three of five cases there was evidence of racial bias and institutional racism. Further work is needed to identify mechanisms through which the bias and racism arose.
INTRODUCTION

The American military is widely regarded as an institution that has served and still serves as a model of positive race relations. This judgment was not always warranted but rests on a compelling history of institutional reform. Over the course of six decades, the military abandoned its past as a segregated institution upholding the values of Jim Crow to become an integrated institution embracing the value of diversity (Burk 2007, Mershon & Schlossman 1998, Moskos & Butler 1996, Segal 1989, Nalty 1986).

President Truman began the process in 1948 by issuing Executive Order 9981 to desegregate the military. Progress toward fulfilling the order was slow and controversial. The Army was particularly reluctant to comply with it and did so only when effective combat operations in the Korean War required large numbers of African American soldiers to serve in desegregated units. After the Korean War, in 1954, all military units were desegregated (Armor & Gilroy 2010). Still, full integration remained elusive. Race riots within the military during the Vietnam era proved that establishing effective racial harmony required more than formal desegregation. Ending the draft in 1973 further intensified demands on the military to confront and root out institutional racism, leading it to pursue racial diversity as a positive goal. The ensuing reforms made racial disparities and discrimination significantly less in the military than elsewhere in civilian life (Lundquist 2008, Quester & Gilroy 2002, Nordlie 1987). In short, the military radically revised the moral contract governing relations between it and its members. By moral contract we mean the set of values, sustained by institutional practice, that specify how an institution should treat those who fall under its control (Burk 2007). The military abandoned its old contract based on racist principles. It adopted a new contract to govern the distribution of military goods such as enlistments, promotions, justice, risk of death in combat, and care for the wounded. Pledging not to discriminate, the military distributed military goods in accordance with general principles opposed to a racist institutional climate and supporting a climate of equal opportunity. Basic to these are the principles of merit, equality, and need (Elster 1992, Deutsch 1985, Walzer 1983).

Under the terms of this new contract, the all-volunteer force was better able to attract minority youth into service. Indeed, minorities, especially African Americans, volunteered to serve in numbers much larger than expected relative to their presence in civilian society (Rostker 2006, Janowitz & Moskos 1979, Gates 1970). High minority enlistment rates helped make the volunteer force a success, at a time when military service was not popular. When the Persian Gulf War was fought in 1991, it was the first war in the twentieth century in which military race relations—measured by a lack of media attention—were not an issue. Moskos & Butler (1996) took this as confirmation that the new moral contract worked; race relations in the military were good and its way of integration was one that other organizations might follow.

Nevertheless, our review of military race relations finds a large but scattered literature, relying on institutional analyses, that documents the persistence of racial disparities within the military. It raises the question of whether these disparities stem from continuing institutional racism, are due to other factors unrelated to racism, or arise from some combination of the two. Typically, these studies address the question by examining the distribution of a specific military good. Consider the distribution of military occupations. Kirby et al. (2000) found that the underrepresentation of black soldiers in special operations forces is a complex result of structural factors (low scores on qualification tests, failure to meet swimming requirements), perceived barriers (lack of identification with special operations forces, perceived racism in special operations forces especially among blacks), and free choice (black soldiers’ preference for military occupations that teach skills transferable to the civilian labor market). Although some of these factors (perceived racism) are problematic, other factors (preference for noncombat-related
occupations) simply represent a rational choice by minorities to pursue a certain career path. Put together, these studies allow one to identify where racial disparities can be found within the military and whether the disparities are institutional products of unfair or biased treatment based on race or ethnic identity.

This approach to institutional analysis, first suggested by Elster (1992) in Local Justice, focuses on the allocative principles that institutions follow when deciding who should receive how much of a particular institutional good. But it is equally concerned to explain departures from a purely principled allocation of goods. As we shall see, allocations can be distorted by the direct or indirect effects of government policies, by choices recipients make when they select among alternative goods, and by the unintended consequences of some allocations made within the institution.

Adopting this approach has at least two related advantages over alternative approaches to the study of race relations and the military. First, it treats the military as a heterogeneous, not a unitary, actor. Doing so allows for it to exhibit varying degrees of compliance with the terms of its moral contract. Relying instead on contact theory as a guide to their study of military race relations, Moskos & Butler (1996) fail to recognize the military’s heterogeneity. Contact theory usefully identifies institutional conditions associated with the promotion of good race relations. But it treats these conditions as if they yielded a single prognosis for whether the military possessed or failed to possess good race relations. The military is too complex to be studied (or judged) in such a simple way. Second, our approach leaves room for the possibility that there are multiple independent explanations about whether and why racial disparities persist within the military. Quite often, macro-oriented studies of race relations and conflicts over foreign and domestic policies are less nuanced (Browne-Marshall 2007, Dudziak 2002, Borstelmann 2001). They operate on a level of analysis too high to discern how any one of the various institutional processes within the military individually shapes race relations.

A third approach to the study of military race relations is based on the life course perspective (MacLean & Elder 2007). Life course theorists have examined whether military service has been a turning point in people’s lives, altering the trajectory of their life for better or worse as it is measured (for instance) by income or educational attainments (Teachman & Tedrow 2007; Teachman 2004, 2005; Mare & Winship 1984), intergroup marriage (Lundquist 2004, Jacobson & Heaton 2003), marital stability (Newby et al. 2005, Gimbel & Booth 1994), health (MacLean 2010, Elder & Clipp 1989), and rates of recidivism (Greenberg et al. 2007, McCarroll et al. 2000, Sampson & Laub 1996, Mattick 1960). These studies are valuable for revealing how the life chances of minority veterans have changed over time in comparison with the life chances of majority veterans or minority nonveterans. But this approach—focused as it is on the life course after military service—provides little or no insight into the intramural institutional processes of allocation that define the quality of race relations within the military, and that is our primary concern.

This review examines the military’s distribution of five key goods: admission into the enlisted ranks, promotion rates, administration of military justice, risk of death in combat, and care for wounded veterans. These goods were selected because there was a stream of research, active over the past 20 years, about their allocations. That was not the case with all military goods. For example, the military’s distribution of medals, although intrinsically interesting, has not been included because the literature on this subject is too sparse. The goods selected ranged from goods of entry into the military (enlistment) to goods of exit from the military (care for wounded, unable to continue in service). They included goods important to those active in their military service (promotion, military justice, and risk of death in combat). Finally, each good examined is representative of at least one of the three general principles relied on to allocate goods in an institution bound by its moral contract to sustain an equal opportunity climate. Enlistment and
promotion are governed by the principle of merit; military justice and the risk of death in combat are governed by the principle of equality; and care for the wounded is governed by the principle of need. Adherence to these allocative principles varied empirically, with evidence suggesting that military race relations in some instances are still discriminatory in part.

RACE AND ENLISTMENT

Before the US government established the all-volunteer force in 1973, minority representation within the military was limited. It rose no higher than the minority’s proportion in the population as a whole. Usually it was less (Segal & Segal 2004). Historically, underrepresentation reflected the reluctance of the larger society to arm racial minorities (Segal 1989, Nalty 1986). With the end of World War II, these historical restraints were largely abandoned (Mershon & Schlossman 1998, Bogart 1992). In the all-volunteer force era, African Americans, Hispanics, Asians, and Native Americans were all welcome to volunteer for service in the military—as long as they were otherwise qualified (Rostker 2006). Underlying this development was the military’s realization that, in the wake of the unpopular Vietnam War, the military would have trouble meeting its recruiting goals if it relied solely on recruits from the dominant white majority. Increased participation from minorities—both men and women—was required. As a result, in the 1970s, for the first time, racial minorities were overrepresented in the armed forces. The problem for research was to describe and explain the changing patterns of representation that occurred.

Trends in Minority Representation

The basic demographic data needed to describe trends in minority representation in the military are readily available through two reports published annually by the Department of Defense, the Annual Demographic Profile (1976–2009) and the report on Population Representation in the Military Services (1997–2009). Based on these data, researchers have identified two major trends, one for African Americans and one for Hispanics. (Other race or ethnic groups make up less than 10% of the military, with the largest of these groups—Asian Americans—representing between 3% and 5% of the military.)

African American representation in the military grew markedly, doubling between 1972 and 1981, from 11%, about the same proportion of blacks in civilian society, to 22%, slightly more than twice the proportion in civilian society. The rise was most dramatic in the Army, which saw black representation peak at 33% of the service in 1981, with most serving in the combat arms. Black representation in the Army remained at or above 30% from 1979 through 1984 (Department of Defense 2002). After this surge in African American enlistment in the 1970s, black representation in the military stabilized at slightly more than 20% and remained at this level throughout the 1990s. There was also a shift in black preferences for military occupations, moving away from service in the combat arms toward service in combat support and administrative specialties. At the end of the 1990s, African American representation began to drop below 20% and reached a low of 13% in 2006 (Segal & Segal 2004). Since then, black representation has risen but remains below 20% (Armor & Gilroy 2010).

Trends in Hispanic representation have been less volatile than trends for African Americans. From 1976 through 1991, Hispanic enlistments made up roughly 4% of all accessions. After 1991, the trend turned upward, reflecting a gradual increase of Hispanics among all new enlistments, from just below 5% of total enlistments to nearly 11% of new enlistments in 2009. Increased enlistments led to increased representation in the military as a whole. Hispanics, who made up just 1% of the force in 1973, grew to 11% of the force in 2007, with the greatest number serving in the Marine Corps. This compares with a Hispanic population of 14.3% of all youths between 18 and 24 years old (Department of Defense 2007). These numbers have to be used with care. In
2003, the Hispanic category was redefined and set apart from other race or ethnic categories to recognize that Hispanics may also be black, white, Asian, etc. (Armor & Gilroy 2010). Still, the changed definition did not alter the main trends. In brief, for the first 20 years of the volunteer force, Hispanics were consistently underrepresented within the military. Over the past 20 years, Hispanic representation has increased and seems poised to equal or exceed the representation of Hispanics in the population as a whole, though it has not yet done so (Department of Defense 2009, Dempsey & Shapiro 2009, Segal & Segal 2004).

Racial Disparities in Patterns of Enlistment

Three major factors explain racial disparities in patterns of enlistment: merit-based criteria for qualified personnel; the propensity (or willingness) of youth to enlist; and the prevailing social context as defined by economic cycles, accumulations of social capital, and prospects for war.

The military defines high-quality recruits largely in terms of two merit-based achievements. One is graduating from high school, which indicates an ability to work successfully within an institutional setting. The other is doing well on the Armed Forces Qualification Test (AFQT), a test of intelligence. It is possible that candidates for enlistment who lack a high school diploma or fail to score high enough on the AFQT may be granted a waiver and allowed to enlist. Although possible, waivers are rarely granted. If the AFQT is misnormed, it can seriously affect the quality of enlisted personnel. This happened in the 1970s, when misnorming the test effectively lowered the bar for enlistment. It allowed many African Americans (and others) to join who otherwise would not have been allowed. Once the misnorming was discovered, the error was corrected and soldiers with low AFQT scores were not allowed to reenlist. Through the 1980s, these efforts led to reductions in black overrepresentation in the Army (Department of Defense 1995). As a consequence, African Americans who joined or remained in the force scored higher than those enlisted in earlier years. With higher scores, they turned away from combat specialties to compete successfully for combat support and administrative jobs, acquiring skills transferable to the civilian labor force (Moskos & Butler 1996, Segal & Verdugo 1994, Teachman et al. 1993). Reliance on merit-based criteria may also help explain underrepresentation in the enlistment of Hispanics in the all-volunteer force era. As a relatively new and fast-growing immigrant group, Hispanic youths may not have immediately met educational, language, or residency requirements for enlistment (Segal et al. 2007, Gifford 2005, Pew Hisp. Cent. 2003). But, over time, as more Hispanics qualified for service, Hispanic representation in the military has grown.

The propensity (or willingness) of youth to serve in the military is the best single indicator of whether youths will enlist (Dempsey & Shapiro 2009, Segal & Segal 2004, Bachman et al. 2000). Since 1970, the Department of Defense has annually gathered data on propensity, relying currently on its Youth Poll and on the University of Michigan’s Monitoring the Future Survey to do so (Mil. Leadersh. Divers. Comm. 2010b). A propensity to serve is indicated when high school seniors say they will definitely or probably enter the service within a few years. More than two-thirds of seniors who report a propensity to serve actually do serve within six years of high school graduation (Woodruff et al. 2006). The data gathered using this measure consistently show that men have a greater propensity to serve than women. Within gender, African Americans and Hispanics have a higher propensity to enlist than whites. Overall, Hispanic males report the highest propensity to enlist and white women the lowest (Segal et al. 2007, Dempsey & Shapiro 2009, Mil. Leadersh. Divers. Comm. 2010b). Since the Persian Gulf War, the propensity to enlist for all groups has declined (Mil. Leadersh. Divers. Comm. 2010b).

The final factor affecting patterns of race and recruiting is the social context, broadly conceived. It is well established that the social
context for recruiting varies inversely with economic cycles. Interest in joining the military rises during economic downturns and falls when the economy recovers (Kleykamp 2006, Gorman & Thomas 1993, Kellar & Nelson 1992, Petersen 1989, Brown 1985, Dale & Gilroy 1983). Still, economic effects are not all-determinative. African Americans from families with incomes below the poverty level were more interested in joining the military than were similarly poor whites (Gorman & Thomas 1993). Their interest was justified. Black youths living in poverty at age 17 who enlisted in the military in the early 1980s escaped poverty by 1990 (Seeborg 1994). Also affecting the social context for recruiting are minority expectations that military service confers social capital that can be cashed in for social recognition or higher social status within the larger civic life (Burk 2007, 1999; Krebs 2006; Salyer 2004; Levy 1998; Nalty 1986). In some cases, status gains within a minority community may count for as much or more than status gains from the dominant group (Leledsma 2006, Leal 2005, Knouse 1991). The prospects for war also matter. In general, minorities and women have been less supportive than white men of post–Cold War military interventions (Nincic & Nincic 2002, Schroeder et al. 1993). After the Persian Gulf War, the rate of black enlistments, which had been high, began to fall. The fall accelerated with the onset of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which were unpopular in the African American community (Armor & Gilroy 2010, Rohall & Ender 2007). This resulted in a difficult recruiting environment from 2003 through 2008. Serious recruiting shortfalls were averted only by paying large enlistment bonuses and by lowering enlistment standards (Asch et al. 2010).

Other Factors Affecting Minority Representation

Other factors affect patterns of minority representation in the military. Consider, for instance, occupational segregation and retention rates. As noted briefly above, since the 1980s, when given a choice, African American service members have not chosen to hold direct combat military occupations. Instead, they have chosen occupations that require skills transferable to the civilian labor force. With majority service members, the preference has been reversed. This has created occupational segregation within the force. As of fiscal year 2009, more than 30% of white service members held combat occupations, whereas less than 10% held administrative occupations. In contrast, nearly 30% of black service members held administrative occupations, whereas 12% held combat occupations (Department of Defense 2009). That black service members prefer administrative military employment is well advised. Kleykamp (2009) shows that civilian employers prefer to hire black veterans who possess transferable skills over black nonveterans. In contrast, employers show no preference to hire veterans with experience in the combat arms.

Firestone (1992) has shown that gender-based occupational segregation is less pronounced in the military than in civilian society. The military’s more equitable distribution is due in the first place to the military’s commitment to equal opportunities. But it also reflects the overrepresentation of blacks among women in the service, which has other causes. In general, African American women are more likely than other women to hold nontraditional jobs. They are as a result more likely to seek military employment, which includes employment in nontraditional military occupations. This contributes to a more representative distribution of women and men across military occupations (Firestone 1992). The distribution is reinforced by high minority retention rates. Compared with whites, black male and female enlisted personnel are far more likely to remain in the military, especially if they are married (Moore 2002). Their high retention rates are a response to push factors in the civilian economy. Minorities join and remain in the military because they believe it provides better opportunities for them than can be found in the civilian sector.

In sum, racial disparities arise from enlistment (and reenlistment) decisions throughout
DO RACIAL DISPARITIES MATTER?

In this section we review studies that examine racial disparities in the distribution of promotions to officers, punishments under the Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ), and the risk of death in combat. In each case, questions are raised about whether racial disparities associated with these distributions result from discriminatory practices within the military.

Promoting Officers

Throughout the all-volunteer force era, minorities have been underrepresented in the officer corps. Over time, the extent of the underrepresentation has lessened. In 1980, nearly 91% of new officer accessions were white. Fewer than 7% were black and slightly more than 2% were Hispanic (Hosek et al. 2001). By 2009, 76% of new officer accessions were white. Slightly more than 9% were African American and 5.6% were Hispanic. The race and ethnic representation of new officers in 2009 nearly mirrored the race and ethnic distribution of civilian college graduates ranging from 21 to 35 years old. Indeed, new white officers were underrepresented whereas new black officers were overrepresented when compared with their civilian counterparts. Still, white officers are predominant in the officer corps. White officers held 92.5% of the general officer slots in 2009. Blacks meanwhile held 5.5% and Hispanics 1.7% of the slots (Mil. Leadersh. Divers. Comm. 2010c, Department of Defense 2009).

Currently, three mutually compatible approaches are taken to understand underrepresentation of racial and ethnic minorities in the officer corps. The first examines perceptions by officers that the promotion process is racially biased. Minority and white officers differ in their perceptions of equal opportunity available in their units. Data for this claim come from surveys that the military conducts to assess (among many things) service members’ perceptions about problems of discrimination within the service at large and within each unit. As Dansby & Landis (1998) report, taken overall, officers have positive perceptions of their unit’s equal opportunity climate. But closer examination reveals differences in responses based on race and ethnicity. Numerous studies (Truhon 2008, Bergman et al. 2007, Hosek et al. 2001, Dansby & Landis 1998, Rosenfeld et al. 1998) have found that racial and ethnic minority officers—men and women—more negatively perceive the equal opportunity climate than do white officers. The largest gap separates white male officers, whose perceptions of equal opportunity climates are the most positive, from African American female officers, whose perceptions of equal opportunity climates are the least positive.

The second approach examines ethnic disparities in promotion rates. The question is whether racial and ethnic minority officers are promoted at lower rates than are white male officers (Mil. Leadersh. Divers. Comm. 2010c; Baldwin 1997, 1996; Daula et al. 1990; Zucca & Gorman 1986). The data seem at first to disclose no difference in promotion rates. In a large study by RAND examining officer promotions from 1967 to 1991, Hosek et al. (2001) found that African American male officers were as likely as white officers to reach higher ranks. The likelihoods were 36% and 37%, respectively. But the result is spurious. In fact, the researchers report black male officers were 29% less likely to be promoted than their white male...
counterparts. The confusion arises because in the military those who are not promoted must quit the service, reducing the proportion of minorities in the pool for the next round of promotions. The finding of low promotion rates for blacks was initially masked because promoted blacks were 20% more likely than promoted whites to remain in the service until the next promotion review, increasing the number of minorities left in the promotion pool. In brief, the choice of black officers to remain in the military when white officers choose to leave creates the mistaken impression that white and black officers are promoted at the same rate.

The third approach studies language used in officer fitness reports to describe the accomplishments of officers up for promotion. At issue is whether descriptors affect the rate at which officers are promoted. Thomas et al. (1998) closely examined the words used to describe an officer’s quality in officer fitness reports. All the words used were positive. Yet there were systematic differences in words used to describe white versus black leaders. Johnson (2001) extended this analysis to discover whether different descriptors used in fitness reports were associated with recommendations for promotion. She found that descriptors associated with recommendations for early promotion were more often ascribed to white officers, whereas descriptors associated with recommendations for on time or no promotion were more often ascribed to black officers. Johnson (2001) concluded that the associations between words and promotions were unintended, perhaps the result of deep-rooted stereotypical responses. The causes of the association remain to be established.

Before moving on, we might briefly ask whether promotion rates among enlisted men vary by race. Butler’s (1976) seminal study of the matter concluded that blacks were discriminated against. Among equally qualified blacks and whites, blacks waited longer than whites for initial promotion to sergeant and to higher noncommissioned officer ranks. (Earlier promotions from private to corporal or specialist are virtually automatic.) Butler’s findings went unchallenged until it was shown by Daula et al. (1990) that they were the result of a statistical artifact. Butler’s data were censored. They omitted observations on individuals who left the service after they were promoted. Once adjusting for the censoring, but otherwise using the same data Butler used, Daula et al. (1990) found no simple relationship between minority status and time to promotion. Minorities were promoted more rapidly than whites in three occupation/pay grade combinations, as rapidly in two combinations, and less rapidly in one. Most recently, the Military Leadership Diversity Commission (2011a) revisited the question. Its analysis of enlisted promotion rates was crude, based on raw promotion rates and lacking a full set of controls. With a few exceptions, the commission concluded that below-average rates of promotion were less common for minorities who were noncommissioned officers than they were for minorities who were officers.

Whatever the causes of minority underrepresentation in the officer corps, the military believes that this underrepresentation detracts from military effectiveness, and so each service has been required to implement affirmative action plans to solve the problem (Leach 2004, Moskos & Butler 1996, Stewart & Firestone 1992). Recently, however, federal courts have restricted the scope of these plans (Mil. Leadersh. Divers. Comm. 2010a). They no longer allow promotion boards to consider how minority status affected an officer’s record before deciding whom to promote (Saunders v. White 2002). Similarly, military retirement boards cannot use racial preference as a factor when allocating involuntary retirements related to downsizing the force (Berkley v. United States 2002, Christian v. United States 2000). In Grutter v. Bollinger (2003), the issue was whether professional schools could use race-conscious admission standards to ensure a diverse learning environment and greater diversity within the profession. The case focused on law school admissions but had broader implications. A decision against race-conscious admission into law school risked ending military outreach efforts to increase minority
representation in the service academies, in ROTC programs, and ultimately in the officer corps. This probable adverse effect on the military helped to narrowly persuade the Court to reach its decision, permitting race-conscious admission policies in professional schools (Toobin 2007). These reverse discrimination cases are politically controversial (Barnes 2007, Leach 2004). The relevant point for this review is that the military has been legally constrained by these decisions from implementing policies it believes would create a more representative officer corps.

Administering Justice

American military justice has historically mirrored the race biases found in the civilian justice system. Recent studies (Kaplan 2005, Lilly & Thomson 1997) document that African Americans serving in Europe during World War II were denied due process and were more likely than whites to be executed in capital cases. Following that war, the military justice system underwent wholesale reform, represented by enactment of the UCMJ and by creation of what is now called the Court of Appeals for the Armed Forces. Both reforms strengthened the military’s commitment to enforce standards of due process and equal protection under the law (Lurie 1998). Nevertheless, it remains a matter for dispute whether the military justice system continues in some ways to reflect racial bias.

The evidence can be puzzling. Numerous studies find no difference in the length of sentences given to punish blacks and whites for the same crime (Edwards et al. 2001, Verdugo 1998, Landis et al. 1997, Edwards & Newell 1994, Perry 1977), suggesting an absence of racial bias in meting out punishment. Yet African American service members are roughly twice as likely as whites to be incarcerated while in the military (Mil. Leadersh. Divers. Comm. 2011b, Moskos & Butler 1996), suggesting that racial bias exists. Black soldiers certainly think so. In a 1992 survey, more than 8% of enlisted black males reported that they had been discriminated against in a UCMJ action within the last year, twice the percentage for whites. Only 38% of black enlisted men believed that white and black enlisted men in their unit received the same punishment for the same crime (Verdugo 1998). Verdugo (1998) suggests that differences may emerge at the gateway into the military justice system, where commanding officers have discretion to determine what charges and punishments (if any) might be levied before a formal process of courts-martial is convened (Lurie 1998).

Moskos & Butler (1996) offer a different explanation. They discount the disparity in incarceration rates and the significance of minority perceptions doubting the fairness of military justice. They do not deny the disparity, but they emphasize that differences in incarceration rates found in the military are much lower than those in civilian society, where African Americans are six times as likely as whites to be incarcerated. They also doubt the significance of the disparate perceptions held by blacks and whites about the equal opportunity climate. They note that only 686 formal complaints of racial bias were filed in 1994. Of these, only 20% were judged to have merit. Because the number of complaints and the proportion of claims found to have merit were so low, Moskos & Butler (1996) conclude that the evidence does not support minority soldiers’ beliefs that they are discriminated against. This conclusion may be hasty. They failed to consider whether lower minority incarceration rates in the military might stem less from a reduction in racial discrimination within the military than from the special character of military life—a carefully screened population with relatively high education, living in a community of relatively low or no poverty, under conditions of full employment. Nor did they provide a standard for knowing whether the number of complaints or the proportion found to be warranted was high or low.

In addition, we cannot be sure how many complaints of racial bias go unreported. In 1983, the Supreme Court (Chappell v. Wallace 1983) denied enlisted members the right to file equal opportunity complaints in federal courts,
including complaints about military punishment. The Court held that adequate channels existed within the services to adjudicate such complaints. Thirteen years later, the General Accounting Office (GAO 1996) found significant problems with these complaint systems and concluded that the problems were sufficient to keep service members from filing complaints. A more recent report (GAO 2008) compared various pilot programs established to deal with the backlog of equal opportunity complaints within the Department of Defense. The need for programs to deal with this backlog casts doubt on the adequacy of existing military channels to manage equal opportunity complaints.

Data other than incarceration rates document that black service members are overrepresented in the military justice system. Walker’s (2001) analysis of disciplinary actions taken from 1987 through 1991 tells that the number of courts-martial convictions dropped by 52% over this period. Black convictions also dropped, but only by 35%, which meant that the proportion of convictions of African Americans rose during this period from 27% to 37%. In contrast, the proportion of convictions for whites dropped from 65% to 54%. Walker observed a similar trend for less serious, nonjudicial offenses (see also Dansby 2001, Landis & Tallarigo 2001, Verdugo 1998).

What explains this persistent overrepresentation of black minorities in the military justice system? Some (Edwards et al. 2001, Dansby 2001) argue that overrepresentation is due in part to cultural differences between blacks and whites, at least with respect to violations of Article 91 of the UCMJ. Article 91 prohibits acts of disrespect or insubordination toward officers. Edwards and colleagues (2001) suspect that behaviors that are part of the normal repertoire of urban blacks might be considered confrontational or insubordinate to members of a predominately white officer corps. Accepting this possibility, Dansby (2001) recommends that high rates of Article 91 offenses for black enlisted men might be mitigated with programs to socialize new black enlisted men into the culture of military society. The researchers failed to consider whether the normal behavioral repertoire of white officers might be considered to be offensive and provocative by black enlisted men. Nor did they consider whether socialization programs might be expanded to include training for officers, helping them to become more attuned to the various cultures found in an increasingly diverse force.

Another factor may be that minorities facing courts-martial are not well advised on how to navigate the military justice system (Verdugo 1998, Landis et al. 1997, Nalty 1986). Blacks are significantly less likely than whites to engage in plea bargaining even though plea bargains typically lead to shorter sentences than those imposed when cases go to trial. When cases go to trial, blacks are more likely than whites to choose trial by a jury of officers and enlisted personnel rather than trial by a judge. Yet, in general, defense counsels believe that trials heard by judges alone are decided more favorably for the accused. The result of these choices is to increase the representation of blacks among those who are charged and convicted of the same crime (Verdugo 1998).

**Risk of Death in Combat**

At the heart of military service is the risk of death in combat. The risk may be easier to bear in a volunteer force than in a drafted force (Moskos & Wood 1988). Yet when a volunteer force is engaged in war, it remains true that the human costs of war are not far from the minds of political leaders or from the minds of the civilian population (Gelpi et al. 2009, Bennett & Flickinger 2009, Gartner 2008). In general, debates about combat casualties, the dead and the wounded, have considered two distinct issues. One is whether the rise of combat casualties diminishes public willingness to support a policy of war (Gelpi et al. 2009, Burk 1999, Mueller 1973). The other, which we focus on here, asks whether the risks of combat death are fairly distributed, especially along racial and ethnic lines.

The question first arose in debates about the Vietnam War, after President Lyndon
Johnson expanded American participation in that war in 1965 (Appy 1993, Nalty 1986, Binkin & Eitelberg 1983). The escalation increased the death toll especially for African Americans, whose proportion of the war dead rose from 6.5% before 1965 to nearly 21% in 1966, a level that was more than twice the proportion of African Americans in the civilian population. This disparity drew public attention. Civil rights leaders complained that black youths were being used as cannon fodder to fight a white man’s war (King 1967). The National Advisory Commission on Selective Service (1967), known as the Marshall Commission, was tasked to identify problems with the fairness of the draft. Among its findings, it condemned racial disparities in combat deaths in Vietnam and asserted that racial, social, and economic groups should bear the risk of death in war only in rough proportion to that group’s presence in society (Flynn 1993, Binkin & Eitelberg 1983). In response to these criticisms, the proportion of blacks represented in Army combat deaths dropped from more than 20% in 1966 to 13.4% in 1967. The proportion dropped further each year through the war’s end for Americans in 1972. Ultimately, calculated over the entire course of the war, the proportion of blacks killed in combat was roughly equal to the presence of African Americans in society (Moskos & Butler 1996).

Nevertheless, after the war, scholars continued to debate whether the military had been racially biased when allocating combat risks (Moskos & Butler 1996, Mazur 1995, Appy 1993, Binkin & Eitelberg 1983, Janowitz 1978). The central question was whether the burdens of war had been racially biased or class biased. Janowitz (1978) argued that the class factor was crucial: that one’s economic position, not one’s race, determined the unequal sacrifices made in Vietnam. Appy (1993) argues that racial disparities mattered most because it was rhetoric about the ethnic disparities of casualties in the mid-1960s that galvanized public and political support for policy change; otherwise the racial disproportions in casualties would have continued. Still others have argued that race and class are so tightly entangled in American history that it is a fool’s errand to try to separate the effects of one over the other. The main point, they say, is that by war’s end there was no statistically significant relationship between race or class and the level of casualties taken in Vietnam (Mazur 1995, Wilson 1995).

What made these debates relevant in the early years of the volunteer force was the overrepresentation of African Americans in the Army enlisted ranks, a trend we examined above. The social composition of the early volunteer force, from the mid-1970s through the 1980s, would certainly have led to racial disparities in combat deaths had that force been called to war. Janowitz & Moskos (1979) worried at the time that the military’s lack of social representativeness would undermine the military’s standing in society. But their worries were unnecessary. The overrepresentation of African Americans in combat roles was not a permanent condition. In any case, Moskos & Butler (1996) supply the evidence that African Americans were fairly represented as a percentage of those killed in the six combat operations from the Mayaguez incident in 1976 through the mission to Somalia in 1993. Blacks were 15% of those killed, a little above the proportion of the relevant age group of blacks in civilian society (about 13%) and underrepresented among the number of blacks enlisted in the military (about 19%).

In subsequent wars fought in Iraq and Afghanistan, African Americans were underrepresented among casualties taken from 2003 through 2009; in contrast, Hispanics have been overrepresented among those killed in combat (Fischer 2009). Compared with the debates about blacks killed in Vietnam, Hispanic deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan have generated little controversy. This may be due to their status as volunteers (Amaya 2007). More important than race or ethnicity in determining the risk of combat death, Gifford (2005) argues, are these three factors: how volunteers are distributed across various units and occupational specialties, what mix of units participate in a particular operation, and the terms of engagement.
There is no evidence that the risk of combat death has been allocated based on organizational practices that are racially discriminatory during the all-volunteer force era. There is some evidence of racial (or class) bias in the risk of combat deaths in Vietnam in the mid- to late 1960s. But once that evidence was known, military organizational practices changed to erase the disparities—by what exact means or at whose direction, researchers have been at pains to discover, but without success (Appy 1993, Binkin & Eitelberg 1983).

CARING FOR WOUNDED VETERANS

The military assumes responsibility for treating the effects of combat on those it sends to war. That responsibility includes caring for those who are wounded by war, not only while they are in the service, but also afterward. What matters is that the wounds were incurred while in the service. Historically, the military has always provided some health care for service members, but the present expansive health care system was established in the wake of World War II because the need for care was so great. The new health care system, administered by the US Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), did not replace military health care. It created two systems. The military continued to care for its wounded soldiers as long as they remained on active duty. The VA specialized in giving care to veterans, including those whose wounds were so severe they could not return to active duty. This division of labor has created bureaucratic entanglements that impede patient care (Dole & Shalala 2007).

From the beginning, the VA was committed to providing equal health care for all veterans regardless of race (Odlone et al. 2002). There is contemporary evidence that the commitment has been kept. Rosenheck & Fontana (2002) report there were no racial differences on 8 of 11 treatment process and outcome measures among white, black, and Hispanic patients enrolled in VA programs for treating posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD). These results are consistent with earlier studies that also found no or few racial differences in VA treatment outcomes (Rosenheck & Seibyl 1998, Rosenheck & Fontana 1996, Leda & Rosenheck 1995). Nonetheless, these studies do not address whether there are racially significant differences in the risk of injury for PTSD or racial differences in gaining access to health care. To pursue these matters, we explore studies of racial differences among veterans as they relate to the risk of suffering PTSD and to the ability of gaining access to VA health care facilities.

Risk Factors for PTSD

The incidence and severity of PTSD symptoms among service members and veterans are associated with exposure to war zone stressors (Tanielian & Jaycox 2008, Rundell 2006, Sonnenberg et al. 2005, Schleger et al. 1992, Kulka et al. 1990). These stressors include, for example, exposure to direct combat, including seeing a buddy killed or killing an enemy combatant; exposure to atrocities or participation in the killing of innocents; and exposure to uncontrollable or indefensible lethal attacks, say, roadside or suicide bombings (Friedman 2006, Beckham et al. 1998). Length of exposure to stressors increases the severity of the symptoms (Boscarino 2006), as does failure to seek early treatment or failure to receive support from family and friends at homecoming (Fontana & Rosenheck 1994).

Wartime stressors do not invariably cause PTSD. According to one estimate (Tanielian & Jaycox 2008), 18.5% of Americans deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan had PTSD; 81.5% did not. In contrast, the rate for soldiers in the British Army who were deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan at roughly the same time was estimated to be much lower, at 4% (Fear et al. 2010). Other factors must be involved (Hoge & Castro 2006, Hoge et al. 2004). To see what these factors might be, Rundell (2006) examined the social demographic characteristics of military personnel who were evacuated from Iraq or Afghanistan primarily for
psychiatric reasons. Of these, 82% were evacuated within the first six months of their deployment. Compared with all those serving in Afghanistan and Iraq, the evacuated were more likely to be young (under 30), in the National Guard or Reserves, enlisted, and female. Important here, they were also more likely to be Hispanic.

Whether studying PTSD among Vietnam War veterans or more recent service members, it is a common finding that minorities are more likely than nonminorities to acquire PTSD (Dohrenwend et al. 2008, Brinker et al. 2007, Boccarino 2006, Rundell 2006, Ortega & Rosenheck 2000, Fontana & Rosenheck 1994, Schlenger et al. 1992). The differences can be large. One study estimated rates of PTSD among Vietnam veterans 15 years or more after their service. The estimate for Hispanic men was 27.9% and for black men 20.6%. For all other men, it was 13.7% (Schlenger et al. 1992). What accounts for such differences is not well known. Loo et al. (2007, 2005, 2001) explored this matter studying a sample of Asian American Vietnam veterans. Using their own race-related stressor scale, they showed that adverse race-related stress is in itself a traumatic event accounting for variation in PTSD symptoms over and beyond variation associated with combat exposure [Sohn & Harada (2008), exploring a similar line of work, found that racial discrimination within the military was associated with lower physical, though not mental, health among minority service members]. Williams (2007) extended the work by Loo et al. by adapting the race-related stressor scale for use with black Vietnam veterans. He found that when black veterans experienced racial prejudice or other indicators of a racist environment within the military, including remarks that denigrated, harassed, or dehumanized Asians, they were more likely than others to experience PTSD symptoms.

Experiencing PTSD symptoms leads to other detrimental consequences. Those who are PTSD-positive are more likely to encounter serious family problems and domestic violence, often targeted at the spouse (Teten et al. 2009, Bell & Nye 2007, Sherman et al. 2006, Gerlock 2004, Orcutt et al. 2003, Begic & Jokic-Begic 2001, Jordan et al. 1992). They are also more likely than their PTSD-negative counterparts to be in poor physical health and to die younger (Boccarino 2006, Vieweg et al. 2006, Forneris et al. 2004).

Minority Access to VA Health Care

In the general population, racial minorities are less likely than nonminorities to receive high-quality health care (van Ryn 2002, Williams & Collins 1995). There are many factors that may explain this, including underlying clinical conditions, patient ability to pay for care, patient preferences, and the conduct of medical providers, who serve as gatekeepers into the system (Harada et al. 2005, Oddone et al. 2002, Collins et al. 2002). Decisions by providers to give or withhold care are known to vary with minority status under a variety of conditions. Nonwhite patients are less likely than whites to receive adequate pain assessment and treatment in a variety of health settings (van Ryn 2002). Black and low-income patients are less likely to undergo a variety of diagnostic tests even though Medicare would pay for them (Oddone et al. 2002). Blacks are less likely than whites to receive kidney transplants, although they are overrepresented in the population needing transplants (Elster 1992). Psychiatrists are more likely to prescribe antipsychotic drugs and to order involuntary hospitalizations of minority rather than white patients, independent of the underlying clinical factors (van Ryn 2002).

Similar barriers erected by medical providers impede the veteran population trying to access the VA for treatment of PTSD. There is evidence, for instance, that black veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been less likely than whites to be screened for PTSD (Seal et al. 2008). Kilbourne et al. (2005) found some gaps in the follow-up care for black versus white veterans who were diagnosed with a bipolar disorder. But gaps in care were not uniform; there were no race differences in the drug therapy prescribed or
in follow-up care after hospitalization. Others have found that blacks in the VA health care system are less likely than whites to be referred for cardiac-related procedures (Murdoch et al. 2003). Most important, black veterans were less able than whites to gain a finding from the VA that their injury or illness was incurred as a result of military service. Without a finding that the injury or illness is service connected, the odds of gaining access to VA services are low. Equal outcomes for VA treatment are an incomplete measure of equal access if minorities qualify for treatment at a lower rate than whites. Yet Murdoch et al. (2003) have shown that the black rate of service connection was substantially lower, at 43%, than it was for all others, at 56% (in a sample that did not include veterans from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan).

There are other barriers limiting minority access to care in the VA health care system. Some of these are due to minority patient preferences to limit treatments. Minorities and whites may avoid seeking treatment for PTSD fearing it will label them as weak and adversely affect their military career (Friedman 2006). Non-Hispanic blacks, Hispanics, American Indians, and Alaskan natives were less likely than non-Hispanic whites to get a flu shot, emblematic of low trust in the VA health care system, with roots perhaps in memories of the Tuskegee syphilis studies (Straits-Tröster et al. 2006). In any case, blacks are more likely to select out of PTSD treatment programs when they are paired with white clinicians (Rosenheck et al. 1995). This issue is not confined to VA programs. Black patients in general need to build trusting relationships with their physicians before agreeing to invasive cardiac procedures (Collins et al. 2002).

Because minorities are at higher risk for PTSD than whites, their well-being requires at least equal access to the VA health care system, within which equal treatment outcomes can be expected. But minorities do not have equal access to the VA health care system as long as they are less likely than whites to have injuries classified as service connected. The long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have ratcheted up demand for health care services at a time when the number of uniformed mental health care providers significantly declined, due largely to financial reasons (Tanielian & Jaycox 2008). The capacity to care for those wounded by PTSD (and other service-connected injuries) is being sorely tested (Priest & Hull 2007, Dole & Shalala 2007). Passing the test, this literature suggests, requires a better grasp on why there are racial disparities in access to military health care and what can be done to overcome them.

CONCLUSIONS

There is consensus that military race relations improved dramatically from the late 1940s to the present. That does not, however, mean no further improvements are required. There is evidence of racial bias and institutional racism in three of the five cases reviewed here. Officer promotions were racially biased by language used in officer fitness reports and by court-imposed limitations on the military’s affirmative action programs. Administering military justice was biased by inadequate systems for filing equal opportunity complaints and by differences in the pretrial paths traveled by minorities and majorities, lengthening sentences imposed on minorities. Minority soldiers deployed in discriminatory environments were at increased risk of suffering from PTSD. Yet care for wounded minority veterans was biased by barriers blocking entry into the VA health care system, demonstrated by low service connection rates for minorities compared with majorities. The evidence for each of these claims should not be overstated. Nonetheless, the evidence is sufficiently strong that further study is warranted to identify the means by which discrimination occurs and might be curbed.

Our review found no evidence of negative racial disparities either in the case of entry into the military or in the risk of death in combat. Racial disparities were found. Patterns of enlistment varied by race, with African Americans trending in one direction and
Hispanics trending in the other. Patterns reflected the different histories of the two groups as each evaluated and adapted to the opportunities military service could provide. The point is that racial patterns of enlistment in this case are simply evidence of diversity, not of discrimination. The case of combat death is more complex. There surely was evidence that blacks were more likely than whites to be at risk of combat death in Vietnam in the early to mid-1960s. Yet public controversy protesting the inequity of this institutional discrimination led to a compensatory response (or set of responses). Response to this controversy so altered the distribution of combat deaths in Vietnam that blacks, by war’s end, were no longer overrepresented among them. How that happened is not known. But African Americans’ risk of combat death might have grown large again, in the early days of the volunteer force when overrepresentation of blacks in the Army was at its peak. But it did not. The distribution of combat deaths in military missions since Vietnam has been race neutral.

Do these various outcomes matter? They matter, we think, in two ways. First, as a practical matter, the US military must maintain good race relations to be an effective armed force. This basic insight justified on instrumental grounds the military’s substantial commitments to equal opportunity and the value of diversity (Moskos & Butler 1996). Our review makes plain that despite efforts to the contrary, institutional racism can still be detected in the distribution of goods that are important both to the military and its service members. It opens the door for future research to help design programs to overcome these instances of discrimination.

Second, the outcomes matter for their contribution to emerging theoretical work about moral contracts for military service. The central idea is that a moral contract specifies (often implicitly) what norms bind the military and its service members to the state and to the larger society (McCartney 2010, Burk 2007, Forster 2006). The values of equal opportunity and diversity, we have seen, are terms included in the moral contract of contemporary military service (Mason & Dandeker 2009, Soeters & van der Meulen 2007). This review shows in particular cases how the contract has been breached or upheld. When the military fails to provide minority officers a fair chance for promotion, the contract is weakened; trust is eroded between minority service members and those with formal authority over them. A similar erosion of trust occurs among minorities who are unfairly treated by the military justice system or whose wounds are not found to be service connected. Evidence of such erosion is found in the persistent gaps between minority and majority perceptions of fairness in their treatment in the military. In brief, institutional analyses of military race relations specifically identify where and why the moral contract is weak. It is the first step toward knowing how the contract might be repaired.

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