

## **U.S. Military Service Members and Romantic Relationships: Identity Gaps, Mindfulness, and Relational Quality**

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In this study, we sought to discover how the ability of service members to communicate with their partner, considering their communal and personal identity, would affect commitment, satisfaction, and intention in their romantic relationships. The communication theory of identity guided this research on the associations between identity gaps and romantic relationship issues among U.S. military service members, both veterans and current forces. Military service members ( $N = 432$ ) completed a questionnaire about their romantic relationships and military service. We hypothesized the larger the gaps between community enactment, personal enactment, and personal, relational identity frames the lower participants would score on relational commitment, satisfaction, and intention. All three gaps were significantly associated with relational closeness and satisfaction. Multiple regression analyses revealed that all three identity frames were substantial predictors of relational commitment and satisfaction, explaining 24% and 51.5% of the variance, even after controlling for other variables. This research supports the tenets of the communication theory of identity. It also supplies practical insights that could help mitigate adverse relational outcomes of U.S. service members.

*Keywords: identity gaps, military service members, romantic relationships, quantitative, communication theory of identity*

Serving in the U.S. military is transformative (Elnitsky, Blevins, Fisher, & Magruder, 2017). Howe and Hinderaker (2018) found the military was like other totalistic organizations in how it used total control of the military member: separation from family, orders on what to wear, and unified hairstyles to manufacture turning points for military members and inculcate an identity faithful to the military and the military's core values. Knight (1990) explored how the use of Jodie calls, or cadence calls about "the guy who f\*cks your significant other while you are deployed" (Johnson, 2021, p. 90), to further instill loyalty to

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the military above all else solely through communication. Researchers have echoed these findings when examining stories about basic training or boot camp (Shpeer & Howe, 2020).

This profound identity transformation into the military can create struggles when communicating with those who have never served (Shpeer & Howe, 2020). Researchers have found these struggles range from internalized anger and contempt to using profanity and verbally assaulting civilian others to withdrawal from communicating with civilian others (Howe & Wilson, 2024; Shpeer & Howe, 2020). These struggles arise with strangers, family, friends, and romantic partners (Knobloch, Basinger, & Theiss, 2018; Peck & Parcell, 2021; Zamir, Gewirtz, & Zhang, 2017). This can lead to strained relationships and misunderstandings, as the military member may be unable to effectively communicate their thoughts and emotions to those who have not experienced the same transformation. The disconnect between the military and civilian worlds can create barriers to understanding, empathy, and mindfulness, causing tension and conflict in romantic relationships. Both military members and their romantic partners need to work toward bridging this communication gap through enacting mindfulness and perspective taking (Howe & Shpeer, 2019) to support healthy and robust connections.

By actively listening to each other's perspectives and experiences, both romantic partners can better understand each other's past experiences and emotional states (Rubinsky, 2019). This mutual respect and empathy can foster stronger bonds and create a supportive environment for service members. By working together to bridge the communication gap, both partners can adequately understand how to strengthen their relationship (Zamir et al., 2017). For example, a civilian who takes the time to understand their military romantic partner's unique experiences, needs, beliefs, and communication styles may be more accommodating and able to address their partner's needs. The service member may, in turn, feel more understood and valued, leading to increased loyalty and dedication to their romantic partner. Bridging the communication gap between military and civilian individuals can lead to mutual respect, empathy, and a stronger sense of unity. Research has shown that service members with dedicated support networks are less likely to suffer from adverse mental and even physical complications of military service (Knobloch, Basinger, & Theiss, 2018).

In this study, the communication theory of identity supplies theoretical reasoning for the relationship between and among identity frames, or "ways to understand and locate identity" (Kuiper, 2023, p. 306), identity gaps, or "discord or disharmony between the frames" (p. 306), and romantic relationship issues (i.e., relational closeness, satisfaction, and intention). Suppose those who have served in the military believe they cannot express their military and personal identities with their romantic partners because of gaps between these identities and either enactment or relational constraints. In that case, they may form negative opinions of their romantic partners' communication patterns. These opinions may impede their abilities to engage in a mindful conversation with their romantic partners (Jha, Rogers, Schoemaker, & Cardon, n.d.). Scholars have linked such negative opinions to relational dissolution (Gottman & Silver, 2015).

This study aimed to better understand the associations between identity gaps (e.g., communal-enacted, personal-relational, personal-enacted) and romantic relationship issues (e.g., relational commitment, relational satisfaction, relational intentions). This study is unique from other studies of military romantic relationships in communication because we focus on the service member. In contrast,

most other military communication scholars focus on spouses, marital dyads, or the family unit. Such an examination can aid in identity theorizing, supply insights into service members' communication issues, and lay a foundation for future treatments and interventions. The following paragraphs supply an overview of the theoretical framework, describe the method used, and discuss how this research contributes to studying military communication, explicitly focusing on the reported communication of service members (past and present).

### **Communication Theory of Identity**

Hecht (1993) proposed four identity frames individuals use to communicate: personal, enactment, relational, and communal. Recently, Kuiper (2023) has proposed a fifth material frame; this frame was not included in the present study as it was published after data collection. The personal frame consists of self-cognitions or how individuals define and describe themselves internally and externally. The enactment frame is how individuals present themselves given social, cultural, physical, and environmental constraints. Hecht argues that only through communication is identity revealed because "not all messages are about identity, but identity is part of all messages" (p. 79). According to Hecht (1993), the enactment frame is interdependent on the relationship frame. The relationship frame has four subdimensions (Kuiper, 2023). Still, it can generally be thought of as how identity is presented as a product of who else is present and the relationships with and between the other communication participants.

This study examines how service members interact with their romantic partners within the relational frame (Hecht & Philips, 2021). For example, an individual may communicate differently with their spouse than their boss. The fourth frame proposed is the communal frame, which "refers to group or collective identities" (Kuiper, 2023, p. 306). It considers the identity of groups and how such group identities influence the individual's identity, which, in the case of this study, is military identity. The fundamental concept of the communication theory of identity is that no singular identity exists, but, like a kaleidoscope, as the orientation of frames changes, the identity portrayed or communicated also changes. As a result, identity is not static but somewhat fluid and subject to various influences.

It is essential to note the impactful work of scholars examining military families, communication, and identity, such as the effect of deployment (Knobloch, Basinger, & Theiss, 2018; Knobloch & Theiss, 2012; Knobloch & Wilson, 2015), combat injuries (Howe & Wilson, 2024; Keeling & Sharratt, 2023; Monk, Basinger, & Abendschein, 2020), and reintegration (Knobloch, Basinger, Abendschein et al., 2018; Knobloch, Monk, & MacDermid Wadsworth, 2023; Scott, Howe, & Bisel, 2023). This study seeks to build and expand on these findings by examining identity gaps and relational markers. This study aims to generalize many of these qualitative findings to reveal the pain points for military members when expressing their identities to their romantic partners. At the same time, this research accounts for other demographic and military factors to realize that different romantic relationships may have differing experiences, for example, same- and opposite-sex partnerships, dating and committed partners, and dual- and single-military households. Therefore, based on the communication theory of identity, this piece provides more information on the general trends in romantic relationships and specific differences that arise.

Hecht (1993) proposed the orientation of identity frames shape identity portrayal because how an individual communicates reveals their identity. Hecht (1993) grounded CTI in work on dialectics and paradoxes because "a dialectical perspective tells us that there are polarities or contradictions in all social life" (p. 76). Hecht expanded on this line of reasoning by explaining, "we often think of contradictions between only two elements at a time" (p. 76), and this thought process has led to a conceptualization of identity as a "dialectic between the individual and society" (p. 76). For instance, people may view a person as professional and respectful if they speak formally and politely, which will shape their identity in the eyes of society. On the other hand, someone who uses slang and casual language may be seen as more laid-back and relatable, influencing their portrayal in social interactions. Regardless of the communication style, individuals constantly navigate different social norms and expectations to portray the acceptable, in each context, portions of their identities. As a result, identity is a fluid and dynamic process that depends on how an individual interacts with society.

Research studies have shown that service members' identities often differ from nonservice members because of the military's extensive training and socialization process (Howe & Hinderaker, 2018; Knight, 1990). Service members may have a strong camaraderie and loyalty to their fellow soldiers, which is often less prevalent among civilians (Howe & Shpeer, 2019). Additionally, service members usually exhibit discipline and resilience in the face of challenges because of their training and experiences in the military. However, it is essential to note that not all service members fit this identity mold, and military identity exists on a spectrum with factors such as branch, years of service, combat experience, and months in a combat zone playing a role (Howe & Biesel, 2023). There are individuals within the military who struggle with discipline and may not feel a strong sense of camaraderie with their peers.

The core idea of the communication theory of identity (CTI) is that individuals express their identities differently based on the situation. Thus, the difference between service members and civilians could lead service members (both current and former) to believe they cannot communicate with nonservice members in a manner that is true to the service member's identity, creating an inability to portray their identities. Knight (1990) writes:

I am still sometimes surprised and horrified at the words I said and the way I thought during and immediately after a brief stint in a military training camp . . . laughing at the unpleasant realities of war, we no doubt were hardening ourselves to our squeamishness and fear . . . the military mindset assumes that a soldier should, under certain conditions, hold no reservations about killing women or children. (p. 166)

Consider a scenario where a service member attempts to articulate these sentiments to their romantic partner. The romantic partner may be unable to see the use of crude humor and may struggle to understand how the person they love can be willing to kill women and children. For this reason, the service member may hide this part of their identity and maintain a facade of being someone they are not. Jung and Hecht (2004) have shown that such identity concealment can have adverse effects on mental health, well-being, and relationship development.

Hecht (1993) also theorized that oppositions are not dyadic because three or more elements can simultaneously conflict or concert. Hecht based his proposal of the four identity frames on a fundamental understanding of multiple simultaneous sources of influence. Hecht further theorized these frames as layered, interpenetrated, and in tension. The key to understanding these frames is Hecht's claim that "identity is inherently a communicative process and must be understood as a transaction in which messages are exchanged" (p. 78).

### **Identity Gaps**

Jung and Hecht (2004) propose the value of CTI may lie in examining individuals' identity gaps. Identity gaps are "discrepancies between or among the four frames of identity" (p. 268). Jung and Hecht (2004) developed two scales to measure identity gaps: personal-relational and personal-enacted. The results of their research show that identity gaps are negatively correlated with communication outcomes. As the gap between personal identity and either relational or enacted identities increased, the amount of reported communication satisfaction, feeling understood, and communication competence decreased. Therefore, if identity gaps make it difficult for individuals to communicate with others in general, then communicating with romantic partners may also be more complicated if the relationship hinders identity portrayal and creates an identity gap. For example, in a romantic relationship where one partner feels pressured to conform to a specific identity that is different from their true self, communication issues may arise. This can manifest in situations where one partner must hide certain aspects of their identity, such as their hobbies or beliefs, to please the other person. As a result, the lack of authenticity in communication can create distance and resentment between the partners, ultimately causing strain on the relationship. Phillips, Ledbetter, Soliz, and Berquist (2018) found support for this idea in a study of identity gaps and family communication.

Phillips and colleagues (2018) found family members who felt they could not be true to their identities with other family members were less likely to be committed to the family because of the sway of enactment and relational frames. These researchers found that participants with lower family identification were more vulnerable to adverse outcomes (e.g., estrangement, lack of social support) than highly identified participants. In the context of this study, these findings imply that service members facing discrepancies between their identity frames and their relational or enacted identities may encounter identity gaps. This gap may lead to relational dissatisfaction or even dissolution. Furthermore, an extension of these findings would suggest the following: when a service member's communal identity frame is greater than the relational identity frame, individuals may look to satiate the communal identity (e.g., service members may withdraw from romantic relationships that do not allow for the expression of their communal identities). These results highlight the importance of aligning one's identity frames to avoid conflicts and relationship dissatisfaction. Supporting service members to express their personal or communal identities within romantic relationships is crucial for maintaining relational satisfaction and closeness and fostering willingness to continue.

Further research could examine interventions or strategies to help service members navigate and integrate their various identity frames more effectively, ultimately enhancing their overall well-being and success. This could lead to a better understanding of how identity impacts the well-being and success of

service members and their families, building on previous research on family identity (Hecht & Phillips, 2021; Phillips & Soliz, 2020). By developing targeted interventions and strategies, service members may be better equipped to manage the complexities of their identities and experience greater cohesion and fulfillment in their personal and professional lives. In addition, understanding the impact of identity on well-being and success can inform policies and programs aimed at supporting service members and their families. By building on existing research in family identity, we can continue enhancing the well-being and success of those who serve our country.

In other studies utilizing CTI, Rubinsky (2019) studied how polyamorous couples who engage in multiple concurrent romantic relationships with the consent of all involved parties navigated identity gaps. Rubinsky found identity gaps were particularly salient for polyamorous individuals, and identity gaps accounted for more variance in statistical models than interpersonal communication competence. Rubinsky stated, "This extends previous research on CTI because, in addition to accounting for some of the variance explained by communication phenomena, identity gaps may be relevant in studying cognitive phenomena" (p. 26) or jealousy. It is plausible that the inability of a service member to portray their communal (i.e., military) identity would create identity gaps and arouse intrapersonal moral reasoning (Meeks & Howe, 2020).

Urban and Orbe (2010) qualitatively analyzed the stories of immigrants to the United States and noted that "competing cultural worldviews impact immigrant identity negotiation and influence each [other] identity gap" (p. 315). Although most service members are not immigrants, service members often experience culture shock when exiting the military and reentering civilian life (Knobloch, Basinger, Abendschein et al., 2018; Peck & Parcell, 2021). Therefore, the findings of Urban and Orbe (2010) may be transferrable to the current investigation if service members cannot enact mindfulness while communicating with their romantic partners.

### **Mindfulness and Romantic Relationships**

Mindfulness and mindfulness training have helped military populations in various ways. Mindfulness is "the practice of nonjudgmental awareness of the present moment" (Wen & Trockel, 2019, p. 195). Zamir et al. (2017) explored the dyadic relationship between mindfulness and married couples after deployment. Results showed mindfulness was positively associated with military couples' marital quality. Mindfulness helped participants increase their self-awareness and awareness of their partners about cognition, emotion, and behavior relating to their marriage. Jha et al. (n.d.) found that when mindfulness training for military cohorts emphasized collective mindfulness, teams build unit cohesion and collaboration by improving interpersonal communication, emotional intelligence, self-awareness, and awareness of others. Zamir and colleagues (2017) found mindfulness contributed to couples having more constructive communication and behaviors because of increased communication skills.

### **Mindfulness and Relationship Satisfaction**

Mindfulness training has enhanced the quality of relationships for military and civilian couples (Zamir et al., 2017). In addition, individuals with and without post-traumatic stress and anxiety have

experienced benefits from mindfulness training (Zamir et al., 2017). Therefore, whether neither, one, or both individuals have anxiety or elevated levels of stress, military couples may receive help from mindfulness training. Mindfulness training often makes married couples closer, accepting, loving, committed, and happy with their relationship. In addition, researchers have linked mindfulness to more assertive communication skills. Mindfulness may help service members become aware of military norms/tendencies that may have contributed to success in combat—such as traditional dominant male roles, ideologies, and norms—yet help understand how these traits/norms may be maladaptive to their relationships and mental health. Howe and Shpeer (2019) found military members who could engage in perspective taking found it easier to enter civilian society after military service. Mindfulness training can enhance perspective taking, thereby shrinking identity gaps.

### **Connecting Identity Gaps, Mindfulness, and the Military Community**

Researchers have shown identity gaps are related to communication phenomena (Jung & Hecht, 2004), family behaviors (Phillips et al., 2018), and cognitive phenomena (Rubinsky, 2019). This study examines how service members' identity gaps, specifically the personal and relational, personal and enacted, and communal and enacted gap, relate to relational closeness, satisfaction, and intention. Based on the literature review presented above, service members who experience a gap between their communal or military identities and the enacted identity frames may experience a moral emotion, like jealousy found by Rubinsky (2019). Howe (2020) found this emotion to be contempt and developed a measure of the amount of contempt service members feel about civilian communication. Howe discovered two forms of contempt: formative and summative. However, recent literature has altered the names of these dimensions for clarity and to lighten the cognitive load. Formative is now referred to as general and summative as targeted. General contempt is the overarching feeling toward a communication partner, whereas targeted is the willingness to express deep contempt toward the partner explicitly (Howe & Bisel, 2023).

Gottman and Silver (2015) explain that contempt is one of the best predictors of relational issues and dissolution. Howe (2020) found nuance in theorizing communication contempt as general and target loaded as separate factors. Therefore, these subscales were analyzed separately in this study. We propose that:

*H1: As general contempt increases, feelings of (a) relational closeness, (b) satisfaction, and (c) intention will decrease.*

*H2: As targeted contempt increases, feelings of (a) relational closeness, (b) satisfaction, and (c) intention will decrease.*

Rubinsky (2019) found identity gaps are also related to romantic relationship issues, such as jealousy. Furthermore, Jung and Hecht (2004) found that personal-relational and personal-enacted identity gaps were negatively associated with communication phenomena. Phillips and colleagues (2018) found these gaps were negatively associated with family commitment and theoretically and empirically associated with relational issues. This leads us to propose:

*H3: As the relational-enacted identity gap increases, feelings of (a) relational closeness, (b) satisfaction, and (c) intention will decrease.*

*H4: As the relational-personal identity gap increases, feelings of (a) relational closeness, (b) satisfaction, and (c) intention will decrease.*

It is unknown which of these measures of identity gaps will be the best predictors of relational issues. We therefore ask:

*RQ1: Which identity gaps best predict (a) relational closeness, (b) satisfaction, and (c) intention?*

### **Method**

Data collection began after the lead researcher's university received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval. More details are provided below.

### **Participants**

The researchers recruited participants from Prolific, an online recruitment service. Prolific filters were used to screen for participants inside the United States who were past or present service members in a romantic relationship. Recruitment information material told participants they would "complete a survey about romantic relationships, emotional states, and military service." All participants who completed the study received \$3 compensation for a Qualtrics estimated 15 minutes of work or a rate of \$12 an hour. Participants who agreed to participate in the research received a link to an online survey hosted by Qualtrics to complete. The first page explained, in detail, the rights of the participant, compensation, risks, benefits, and privacy guidelines, as required by the University's IRB, and then asked if the participant consented.

Participants received phone numbers for the Veterans Crisis Line if they felt any mental or emotional discomfort. Participants who consented to the study began the survey. Those who did not consent received an end-of-study screen. A total number of 432 participants began the study; however, 25 failed verification check questions (18 or older, military service, in a romantic relationship), so the survey ended at once; 8 did not complete two or more scales; and 3 answered items as serial responses (e.g., 100, 100, 100). Therefore, after removing these participants, 396 responses remained for analysis ( $N = 396$ ).

Participants' ages ranged from 18 to 80 ( $M = 39.20$ ,  $SD = 12.25$ ). Participants identified as men (68, 67.7%), women (120, 30.3%), and nonbinary (4, 1.0%); the remaining 4 participants did not supply a sexual identity. Participants identified as White ( $N = 285$ , 72%), Multiracial ( $N = 33$ , 8.3%), Hispanic or Latinx (32, 8.1%), Black (25, 6.3%), and Asian (12, 3.0%). Seven participants (1.8%) supplied specific ethnic identities, which are withheld to protect participant anonymity, and two participants did not answer. Participants reported completing an associate's (62, 15.7%), bachelor's (125, 31.6%), master's (61, 15.4%), doctoral/professional (8, 2.0%) degrees; 109 participants (27.5%) reported some college but no



degree; 29 (7.3%) reported high school as the highest level of education; and 2 declined to answer. Participants reported they were in the following types of romantic relationships: married or committed partners (306, 77.3%), seriously dating (49, 12.4%), engaged (20, 5.1%), dating (12, 3.0%), casually dating (5, 1.3%), and four declined to answer. Participants reported their sexual orientation as straight (329, 83.1%), bisexual (35, 8.8%), gay (10, 2.5%), and a diverse set of responses (18, 5.6%); however, no single response had an  $n > 4$ , therefore, to protect participant's identity, these responses are not noted here. The length of a romantic relationship ranged from one week to 65 years, with an average of 173.39 months or 14.45 years ( $SD = 492.31$  months). Of the 392 participants who responded to a question about their romantic partners' military service, 308 (77.8%) said their partners had not served in the military.

Most participants had served on active duty at some point (358, 90.4%), and some were still on active duty (64, 16.2%). About the period of service, 182 (46.0%) reported serving after 9/11/2001, 47 between 1990 and 2001 (11.9%), 43 between 1975 and 1990 (10.9%), and 20 before 1975 (5.1%); however, 104 participants (26.3%) declined to answer. Participants reported serving in the Army (169, 42.7%), Air Force (97, 24.5%), Navy (79, 19.9%), Marines (25, 6.3%), Coast Guard (9, 2.3%), and others (9, 2.3%), and eight participants (2.0%) did not answer. For the type of service, 142 (35.9%) said they never left the United States, 96 (24.2%) left the United States but did not go to a combat zone, 71 (17.9%) deployed to a combat zone but did not see combat, and 78 (19.7%) reported deploying to a combat zone and experiencing combat; 9 participants (2.3%) did not answer. Participants' reported combat months ranged from 0 to 68 ( $M = 8.10$ ,  $SD = 10.02$ ). Reported time since exiting the military service ranged from 0 to 75 years ( $M = 11.86$ ,  $SD = 12.61$ ). Reported time in military service ranged from 1 to 50 years ( $M = 6.89$ ,  $SD = 5.92$ ).

### **Procedures**

After completing the university consent form and answering the verification questions, participants completed the veteran contempt for civilian communication, personal-relational identity gap, personal-enactment identity gap, relational closeness, relational satisfaction, and relational intention scales. Using the logic function in Qualtrics, these scales appeared randomly, and all scale items were randomized. After the scales had been completed, participants completed the demographic section. Qualtrics logic then redirected participants to Prolific for survey completion credit and payment.

#### *Veteran Contempt for Civilian Communication*

Howe (2020) developed the veteran contempt for civilian communication (VCCC) to measure the amount of contempt veterans feel toward a general civilian other. The VCCC has two subdimensions: general and targeted contempt. The scale was modified by changing the word "civilian" to "my romantic partner." The scale anchors and scores used in development were 0 = *Hell No* and 100 = *Hell Yes* to accommodate participants' language (Howe, 2020). Higher scores on the VCCC represent more contempt. The 12-item VCCC general was reliable at a Cronbach's alpha of .90, and SPSS created a composite scale ( $M = 20.49$ ,  $SD = 17.67$ ). The 8-item VCCC targeted was reliable at a Cronbach's alpha of .89, and SPSS created a composite scale ( $M = 12.75$ ,  $SD = 16.11$ ).

### *Identity Gap Scales*

Jung and Hecht (2004) detail the theorization and development of a measure to assess the gaps between personal and relational identities and personal and enacted identities. The scale was adjusted by changing "communication partners" to "romantic partners." Anchors from the original scale were used. A 100-point sliding scale was employed to remain consistent with the other scales where 0 = *Strongly Disagree* and 100 = *Strongly Agree*. Jung and Hecht report the 11-item personal-relational scale had a Cronbach's alpha of .86. In this study, the scale was reliable at .90. Jung and Hecht found the 11-item personal-enactment scale reliable at a Cronbach's alpha of .89, and in this study the alpha coefficient was .93. The personal-relational scale had a mean of 31.18 (SD = 20.27), whereas the personal-enactment scale had a mean of 22.30 (SD = 19.66). A higher score on both scales represents a more significant gap between frames.

### *Relational Closeness*

Aron, Aron, and Smollman (1992) created the inclusion of the other scale to measure the overlap between two individuals. Participants rated their relationships on this scale by rating which image best represented their relationship. Image one showed two circles where the self and the other were not touching, and image seven showed two circles that overlapped entirely. In between these anchors were images with incremental overlap. The average score on this scale was 3.52 (SD = 0.83).

### *Relational Satisfaction*

Hendrick, Dicke, and Hendrick (1998) proposed a 7-item generic measure of relationship satisfaction known as the Relationship Assessment Scale. Hendrick found this scale reliable at a Cronbach's alpha of .86. The anchors from the original scale were used; however, they were assessed on a 100-point sliding scale where 0 = *Below Average* and 100 = *Above Average*. The alpha coefficient in this study was .93 ( $M = 76.45$ ,  $SD = 21.32$ ).

### *Relational Intention*

Participants reported relational intention, or the desire to stay or leave a relationship, by completing a 4-item scale where they reported the degree, from 1 = strongly agree to 5 = strongly disagree, to which they thought they would remain in a relationship. This scale was reliable at a Cronbach's alpha of .91 ( $M = 3.25$ ,  $SD = 1.50$ ).

## **Results**

The researcher tested the proposed hypotheses using IBM SPSS 27. Before hypothesis testing began, variables that may need to be included as covariates were tested to see if there were any significant differences. The lead researcher conducted ANOVAs for various potential covariates. Racial differences were nonsignificant for relational closeness [ $F(6, 387) = 0.66$ ,  $p = .681$ ], satisfaction [ $F(6, 387) = 0.80$ ,  $p = .568$ ], and intention [ $F(6, 387) = 1.88$ ,  $p = .083$ ]. Military partner service was nonsignificant for relational

closeness [ $F(6, 385) = 0.03, p = .859$ ], satisfaction [ $F(6, 385) = 2.40, p = .121$ ], and intention [ $F(6, 385) = 1.10, p = .291$ ]. A correlational matrix revealed no significant relationships between time in service, active-duty service, branch of service, type of service, relationship months, military service years, months in combat, and months since exit with any of the dependent variables (i.e., relational closeness, relational satisfaction, relational intention).

### **Control Variables**

Other ANOVAs revealed significant differences for some demographic factors. When results showed significant differences and more than two groups existed, post hoc analyses using Bonferroni correction revealed which groups differed. The level of education was significantly different for both relational closeness [ $F(6, 387) = 3.55, p < .01$ ] and satisfaction [ $F(6, 387) = 3.68, p < .001$ ]. Post hoc analyses revealed that those who had completed only high school scored significantly lower than those who had completed some college ( $MD = -0.63, p < .01$ ) or a master's degree ( $MD = -0.71, p < .01$ ) on the inclusion of others in the self. Furthermore, those who had completed only high school scored significantly lower in relational satisfaction than those who had completed some college ( $MD = -14.49, p < .05$ ), a bachelor's program ( $MD = -13.25, p < .05$ ), and a master's program ( $MD = -20.27, p < .001$ ). Post hoc tests revealed no other significant differences. To control this difference, the researcher created a dichotomous variable for high school and some college or beyond.

Self-reported sexual identification was significantly different for relational closeness [ $F(2, 389) = 7.80, p < .001$ ]. Post hoc tests revealed that men scored significantly lower than women ( $MD = -0.35, p < .001$ ). The researcher created a dichotomous variable for men and women to control for this difference. The biological sex of the romantic partner was also significant but only for relational closeness [ $F(1, 389) = 6.67, p < .01$ ]. Participants with partners who were men scored significantly lower ( $MD = -0.24$ ) than those whose partners were women. The researcher created a dichotomous variable for male and female partners to control for this difference.

Romantic relationship type was significantly different for both relational closeness [ $F(4, 387) = 3.87, p < .01$ ] and satisfaction [ $F(4, 387) = 387, p < .001$ ]. Post hoc analysis revealed one significant difference for relational closeness: those who were dating scored lower than those who were married or in a committed relationship ( $MD = -0.69, p < .05$ ). Post hoc tests of relational satisfaction revealed those who were casually dating scored significantly lower than those who were seriously dating ( $MD = -39.54, p < .001$ ), engaged ( $MD = -39.63, p < .001$ ), and married or committed partners ( $MD = -40.67, p < .001$ ). Those who were dating scored significantly lower than those who were seriously dating ( $MD = -27.02, p < .001$ ), engaged ( $MD = -27.12, p < .01$ ), or married/committed partners ( $MD = -28.15, p < .001$ ). The researcher created a dichotomous variable for dating and committed relationships to control for these differences.

Participant-reported sexual orientation held significant differences for both relational closeness [ $F(3, 388) = 5.85, p < .001$ ] and satisfaction [ $F(3, 388) = 3.26, p < .05$ ]. The number of participants who reported a sexual orientation other than straight, gay, or bisexual was too few to perform statistical tests with and, therefore, grouped as LTQ+. About relational closeness, post hoc analyses revealed those who

identified as straight scored significantly higher than those who identified as gay ( $MD = 0.76, p < .05$ ) or LTQ+ ( $MD = 0.62, p < .05$ ). About relational satisfaction, post hoc analyses revealed those who identified as straight scored significantly higher than those who identified as gay ( $MD = 19.54, p < .05$ ). The researcher created a dichotomous variable for straight and LGBTQ+ to control these differences.

### ***Hypothesis Testing***

Partial correlations of the main study variables revealed significant differences. Control variables used included age, education, biological sex, partner's biological sex, romantic relationship type, and sexual orientation, as described above. The variables examined were VCCC general, VCCC targeted personal-relational identity gap, personal-enacted identity gap, relational closeness, satisfaction, and intention. Consistent with H1, VCCC general was significantly and negatively associated with relational closeness [ $r(381) = -.38, p < .001$ ] and satisfaction [ $r(381) = -.56, p < .001$ ], but intention was nonsignificant. Consistent with H2, VCCC targeted was significantly and negatively associated with relational closeness [ $r(381) = -.41, p < .001$ ] and satisfaction [ $r(381) = -.56, p < .001$ ], and again intention was nonsignificant. Consistent with H3, the personal-relational identity gap was significantly and negatively associated with relational closeness [ $r(381) = -.45, p < .001$ ] and satisfaction [ $r(381) = -.66, p < .001$ ], but relational intention was nonsignificant. Finally, consistent with H1, the personal-enacted identity gap was significantly and negatively associated with relational closeness [ $r(381) = -.48, p < .001$ ] and satisfaction [ $r(381) = -.67, p < .001$ ], but relational intention was nonsignificant. Please see Table 1 for more details.

In summary, H1a, H1b, H2a, H2b, H3a, H3b, and H4a, H4b were all supported. Specifically, as service members scored higher on VCCC general, VCCC targeted, personal-relational identity gap, and personal-enacted identity gap, they scored lower on relational closeness and satisfaction. The results revealed no significant differences between relational intention and other variables; thus, H1c, H2c, H3c, and H4c were unsupported.

**Table 1. Partial and Full Correlations of Major Study Variables.**

Variable	Cronbach's alpha	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
VCCC General	.90	20.49	17.67		.847***	.626***	.548***	-.354***	-.552***	-.054	-.121*
VCCC Targeted	.89	12.75	16.11	.848***		.576***	.528***	-.409***	-.564***	-.066	-.141**
Personal-Relational Identity Gap	.89	31.18	20.27	.620***	.562***		.728***	-.465***	-.674***	-.049	-.132**
Personal-Enacted Identity Gap	.93	22.30	19.66	.531***	.516***	.721***		-.469***	-.672***	-.001	-.104*
Relational Commitment		3.52	0.83	-.378***	-.409***	-.447***	-.475***		.618***	-.023	-.021
Relational Satisfaction	.86	76.45	21.32	-.558***	-.559***	-.664***	-.674***	.589***		.054	.054
Relational Intention	.91	3.25	1.50	-.054	-.069	-.047	.007	-.030	.046		.065
Military Identity		62.74	27.00	-.124*	-.152**	-.148**	-.105*	.006	.082	.081	

Notes. \* =  $p < .05$ , \*\* =  $p < .01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ . The bottom left triangle presents partial correlations controlling for age, education, biological sex, partner biological sex, romantic relationship type, and sexual orientation. The upper right triangle presents full correlations.

About RQ1a, multiple linear regression answered this question. The regression analysis included relational closeness as the dependent variable. The model of this regression included age, education (dichotomous), biological sex (dichotomous), partner biological sex (dichotomous), romantic relationship type (dichotomous), and sexual orientation (dichotomous). The second model added VCCC general and targeted. The third model added personal-relational and personal-enacted identity gaps. All three models were significant with the final model [ $F(10, 385) = 21.13, p < .001, R^2 = .354$ ]. According to beta weights, the significant predictors of relational closeness were the personal-enacted identity gap ( $\beta = -.277$ ), VCCC targeted ( $\beta = -.234$ ), personal-relational identity gap ( $\beta = -.152$ ), romantic relationship type ( $\beta = .152$ ), and education ( $\beta = .123$ ) (see Table 2 for full results). These results show the personal-enacted identity gap best predicted relational closeness, followed by VCCC targeted and personal-relational identity gap.

**Table 2. Multiple Linear Regression of VCCC General and Targeted, Personal-Relational and Personal-Enacted Identity Gaps on Relational Closeness, Hypotheses 1a, 2a, 3a, 4a, RQ1a.**

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$
Age	-0.01	0.00	-.082	-0.01	0.00	-.086	-0.01	0.00	-.078
Education	0.58	0.16	.180***	0.44	0.14	.136**	0.39	0.14	.123**
Biological Sex	-0.36	0.17	-.199*	-0.30	0.16	-.166	-0.29	0.15	-.161
Partner Biological Sex	-0.04	0.17	-.023	0.04	0.16	.023	0.08	0.15	.044
Romantic Relationship Type	0.41	0.11	.187***	0.38	0.10	.175***	0.33	0.10	.152**
Sexual Orientation	-0.14	0.12	-.063	-0.12	0.11	-.053	-0.05	0.10	-.023
VCCC General				-0.00	0.00	-.075	0.00	0.00	.094
VCCC Targeted				-0.02	0.00	-.320***	-0.01	0.00	-.234**
Personal-Relational Identity Gap							-0.01	0.00	-.152*
Personal-Enacted Identity Gap							-0.01	0.00	-.277***
<i>F</i>	(6, 389) = 8.34***			(8, 387) = 16.88***			(10, 385) = 21.13***		
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.114			.259			.354		
$\Delta R^2$	-			.145			.096		

Notes. \* =  $p < .05$ , \*\* =  $p < .01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ .

About RQ1b, multiple linear regression answered this question. The regression analysis included relational satisfaction as the dependent variable. The three models mirrored the analysis described above. All three models were significant with the final model [ $F(10, 385) = 54.01, p < .001, R^2 = .584$ ]. According to beta weights, the significant predictors of relational satisfaction were the personal-enacted identity gap ( $\beta = .355$ ), personal-relational identity gap ( $\beta = .278$ ), VCCC targeted ( $\beta = .189$ ), romantic relationship type ( $\beta = .131$ ), education ( $\beta = .092$ ), and age ( $\beta = -.073$ ) (see Table 3 for full results). These results show the personal-enacted identity gap best predicted relational closeness, followed by the personal-relational identity gap and VCCC targeted.

No significant associations existed between the independent variables and relational intention, so no linear regression was warranted. Therefore, RQ1c is unanswered.



**Table 3. Multiple Linear Regression of VCCC General and Targeted, Personal-Relational and Personal-Enacted Identity Gaps on Romantic Relationship Satisfaction, Hypotheses 1b, 2b, 3b, 4b, RQ1b.**

Variable	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$
Age	-0.13	0.09	-.073	-0.15	0.07	-.085*	-0.13	0.06	-.073*
Education	14.83	4.08	.181***	9.37	3.35	.115**	7.53	2.77	.092**
Biological Sex	-3.08	4.50	-.068	-0.70	3.68	-.015	-0.20	3.03	-.004
Partner Biological Sex	-0.52	4.44	-.011	3.53	3.66	.075	4.90	3.01	.104
Romantic Relationship Type	10.28	2.91	.184***	9.19	2.38	.165***	7.31	1.96	.131***
Sexual Orientation	-0.76	3.15	-.013	-0.43	2.58	-.008	2.18	2.13	.038
VCCC General				-0.34	0.09	-.281***	-0.03	0.08	-.022
VCCC Targeted				-0.41	0.10	-.310***	-0.25	0.08	-.189**
Personal-Relational Identity Gap							-0.29	0.05	-.278***
Personal-Enacted Identity Gap							-0.39	0.05	-.355***
<i>F</i>	(6, 389) = 4.78***			(8, 387) = 29.90***			(10, 385) = 54.01***		
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	.069			.382			.584		
$\Delta R^2$	-			.313			.202		

Notes. \* =  $p < .05$ , \*\* =  $p < .01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ .

## Discussion

Grounded in research on military service members, the communication theory of identity, and mindfulness literature, this study proposed that identity gaps, or the distance between two identity frames, would be negatively associated with relational closeness, satisfaction, and intention. Results showed that gaps between communal-enacted (i.e., VCCC general and targeted), personal-relational, and personal-enacted identities were significantly and negatively associated with relational closeness and satisfaction. However, the results revealed no significant associations with relational intention. Multiple linear regression results revealed the personal-enacted identity gap was the best predictor of relational closeness and satisfaction. Furthermore, the final regression models explained 35.4% of the variance for relational closeness and 58.4% for relational satisfaction. The following paragraphs discuss these findings in more detail and consider existing scholarship.

This study found relational closeness and satisfaction decreased as gaps between communal-enacted, personal-enacted, and personal-relational identity frames increased. Some examples of how this could occur would be if the service member had participated in combat but felt they could not share these experiences with their partner. The service member would likely experience a gap between their personal and relational identity, as the individual cannot be entirely accurate to him- or herself in relationships. Another idea to consider is how communication shapes military members and changes their communication and identities (Howe & Hinderaker, 2018; Shpeer & Howe, 2020). Service members often use language civilians would consider harsh or vulgar (Knight, 1990); in fact, in the *Military Slang Dictionary* edited by Johnson (2021), over 50 entries begin with or contain the word f\*ck. If a service member uses this language while on duty and then must switch to a more appropriate language around civilians, this could create identity gaps between the personal or communal and enacted frames.

Military service fosters an identity change (Elnitsky et al., 2017). Service members often value time, competence, and teamwork differently than civilians. Researchers have found the military uses structured turning points during entry training to facilitate this identity change in its members (Howe & Hinderaker, 2018). Such an identity shift can lead to military members having difficulty while serving (Knobloch & Basinger, 2020) and after exiting (Howe & Wilson, 2024; Monk, Oseland, Nelson Goff, Ogolsky, & Summers, 2017) when communicating with civilians. Researchers have documented communication issues in the classroom (Howe & Shpeer, 2019), workplace (Howe & Bisel, 2020, 2023), and healthcare providers (Koenig, Maguen, Monroy, Mayott, & Seal, 2014). This piece adds to the literature by showing how identity gaps can lead to difficulties in romantic relationships. It is likely the highly structured socialization process of the military and the removal of individual identity to allow for military identity (Howe & Wilson, 2024; Knight, 1990) that not only affects service members but also their primary ties (e.g., romantic partners, children, parents), which researchers have found in other organizations (Hinderaker & O'Connor, 2015).

Considering the cultural nuances of the military (Knobloch & Wehrman, 2014) and the emphasis of the military on the morally right way to perform everyday tasks, such as grooming and fitness standards (Howe, 2020), then relational issues, which are present in all romantic relationships, may be exacerbated when a service member's romantic partner does not allow for the service member to display their identity entirely. This is not a criticism of the romantic partner, as they may be unaware of the inner thoughts of the service member, but a reminder that some of the deeply inculcated norms and

practices of the military (e.g., not showing emotion; Knight, 1990) may negatively impact the ability of a service member to express this difficulty to their romantic partner. Service members with unresolved identity gaps may seek to satiate their communal identities as service members over their enacted or relational identities, as researchers found communal identities to have a stronger pull than other identity forms (Phillips et al., 2018).

Results supported all hypotheses advanced about relational closeness and satisfaction. However, hypotheses about relational intention were not. The high number of married or committed partners in this study partially explains the absence of significant findings, as analyses showed differences between dating and committed romantic relationships. Furthermore, the cross-sectional nature of this study may need to be revised to capture significant variance among those involved in romantic relationships. Therefore, a longitudinal study assessing the outcomes of identity gaps on relational continuance is necessary to see how these issues play out over time.

Finally, according to regression analysis, the most significant indicator of relational closeness and satisfaction was the gap between personal-enacted identities. The second greatest indicator for relational closeness was communal enactment (i.e., VCCC targeted), and the third was personal-relational. For relational satisfaction, these flipped with the personal-relational second and communal-enactment third. Furthermore, the final relational closeness regression model explained 35.4% of the variance, and identity gaps explained 24.0%. The final relational satisfaction regression model explained 58.4% of the variance; identity gaps accounted for 51.5%. These numbers indicate that assessing the identity gaps felt by service members may be an essential tool for assessing romantic relationship issues. Rubinsky (2019) found that identity gap measures explained more variance in romantic relationship satisfaction than other communication variables, and this study adds to these findings further evidence of the usefulness of using identity gap measures when examining military service members' romantic relationships. The communication theory of identity's unique approach to identity as multifaceted continues to show superiority to other identity theories that only examine one piece of identity. For example, social identity theory primarily looks at in-group and out-group phenomena. Therefore, the communication theory of identity allows communication scholars to examine identity from a more holistic perspective. Our methodological tools mainly constrain the uses of this theory, as it is challenging to assess more than two gaps at a time.

### ***Practical Implications***

Interventions, training, and workshops on mindfulness and perspective taking may aid military service members and their romantic partners in shrinking identity gaps and improving their relationships. Knobloch and Basinger (2020) discuss how communication practices can mediate the relationships between depression symptoms and relational satisfaction for service members and conclude that training in self-disclosure and conflict management may help improve relationships. Monk et al. (2017) also describe how interventions can help improve relational adjustments for service members and their romantic partners. This study illuminates a specific area—identity gaps—where interventions, training, and workshops can be performed to help military service members, past and current, have more successful relationships with their romantic partners. Training on mindfulness has been found to help couples develop more constructive behaviors from increased intra- and interpersonal skills (Zamir et al., 2017). Howe and Shpeer (2019) found that one issue military veterans face is

the ability to engage in perspective taking. A blended training of mindfulness and perspective could provide the most benefit in shrinking identity gaps and helping service members and their romantic partners better understand and communicate with each other. Therefore, the military may offer resources for or provide interventions, training, and workshops on mindfulness and perspective taking to help maintain romantic relationships and transition service members back into their romantic relationships after service.

### Limitations and Future Directions

This study has limitations. The design of this study does not lend itself to causal claims. This study does find covariance between study variables, and regression findings show meaningful relationships. Perhaps those dissatisfied with their relationships experience identity gaps after the fact. Although this explanation does not align with theory and prior research (Gottman & Silver, 2015), it is a possibility that cannot be ruled out except through experimental or longitudinal designs. A second area for improvement is the need for a more diverse sample, although the sample does represent the demographic makeup of the population being studied. Finally, some findings suggest differences between individuals with differing sexual orientations; however, because of the few responses received, it would be overreaching to say that these responses were representative in any way. How identity gaps work within romantic relationships may be better studied through in-depth interviews.

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