
SUMMARY

Over the 25 years of the All Volunteer Force, the cohorts of newly commissioned officers have included increasing numbers of minorities and women. Yet future senior officer ranks will only become as diverse as the junior ranks are today if these minority and women officers are retained and promoted.

Between 1967 and 1991, the Pentagon almost quadrupled the representation of minorities in the ranks of its newly commissioned officers to 11 percent. The portion of new officers who were women soared ninefold during that period to 18 percent. Most of the increase occurred in the 1970s. Our study focuses on officers commissioned during this period, 1967–1991, when the junior officer corps became more diverse.

To progress through the officer ranks, individuals need to be promoted and retained between promotions. Our research looks at whether officers obtain the promotions that they need to stay in the military and whether they choose to continue in their careers. We look for patterns of differences between groups of officers defined by both race and gender. When we find differences, we attempt to identify explanations for various promotion and retention outcomes.

RESEARCH APPROACH

We conducted two complementary research efforts to investigate the career progression of minority and female officers. In one effort we analyzed the personnel records of more than 76,000 officers who were commissioned in one of seven years beginning in 1967 and

ending in 1991 (1967, 1970, 1977, 1980, 1983, 1987, 1991). These files, provided by the Defense Manpower Data Center, record the race, ethnicity, gender, marital status, commissioning source, and military occupation of each officer. They also allowed us to track how long officers were retained and to determine when they were promoted. We tracked officers through promotion to the O-6 level.

Our study excluded those in the professional ranks—namely, members of the medical corps, lawyers, and chaplains. In most services, those professions have career paths, promotion procedures, and management structures that are distinct from the systems in place for other officers. Using these data we measured retention and promotion by race, ethnicity, and gender at each rank. We also separated the years of service into retention periods—i.e., periods when individual officers made decisions about whether to stay in or depart from the military—and promotion periods—i.e., periods when officers went before promotion boards. We looked at officer career progression as a series of retention and promotion outcomes, each conditional on its predecessor. We classified these outcomes as retention at O-1 rank, promotion to O-2, retention at O-2, promotion to O-3, and so on. In total, we identified nine outcomes that take place between an officer's being promoted to O-2 and receiving a promotion to O-6.

For each of the nine outcomes, we estimated the differences in the fraction retained or promoted between white males and up to three minority and gender groups, depending on sample sizes: black males, other minority males, white women, black women, and other minority women. Our analysis differed from other studies, which typically have estimated differences for whites versus minorities or for men versus women, but not for groups defined by race and gender. We controlled for service, cohort, source of commission, and occupation in those estimates.

Our second research effort involved interviews and focus groups with 233 individuals: 143 midcareer officers, 45 individuals who manage officers, and 45 who select them for promotion. We conducted one-on-one or small group interviews with the career managers and promotion board members in our sample. These sessions were designed to gain information about the career management and promotion system in each military service and the factors linked to a

successful career. We also carried out one-on-one interviews with roughly one-quarter of the midcareer officers in our sample; the rest we interviewed in focus groups. Conducted at four major installations from each service, these interviews and focus groups with a cross-section of officers in the middle years of a career were designed to gain information about how the career-management and promotion system is perceived to run.

In general, we selected midcareer participants from each minority and gender group to ensure representation from the full range of commissioning sources and occupational specialties. In the focus groups, we conducted separate sessions for black males, white males, black females, and white females in order to provide an environment in which individuals felt free to express opinions and share experiences. Small numbers made focus groups with other minority groups infeasible.

FINDINGS

In general, we found that women were less likely to reach higher officer ranks (O-4 and above) than were men, but blacks were not significantly less likely to reach higher ranks than were whites. Larger differences emerged when we studied patterns in promotion and retention separately. Black male officers throughout the military generally failed promotions in higher proportions than did their white male counterparts. However, those who were promoted were more likely to stay until the next promotion point. Black male officers were 29 percent more likely to fail promotions than were their white male counterparts but were 20 percent more likely to stay in the military during retention windows. These promotion and retention differences were offsetting, so overall, black and white male officers had essentially the same chance of reaching the career stage at O-4. Combining promotion and retention rates, we found that 37 percent of white men and 36 percent of black men made it to the O-4 rank.

White female officers, in contrast, received promotions in only slightly lower proportions than did white males, but they left the military at earlier career stages, thereby reducing the size of the pool of those remaining eligible for promotion. Compared to white men, white women were only 7 percent more likely to fail promotions, but

they were 14 percent more likely to leave during retention periods. The fraction reaching O-4 rank was only 30 percent, substantially below the fraction of white male officers.

Black females showed tendencies both to fail promotion and to leave military service early in their careers. Compared again to white males, they were 39 percent more likely to fail promotion and 14 percent less likely to leave during retention windows. About as many black women as white women reached O-4 rank (31 percent).

Retention and promotion results for other minority groups are limited due to small sample sizes. However, they generally resembled the results for black officers.

Questions arising from these tendencies—Why were blacks less likely to receive promotions? Why were women more likely to leave the military during retention periods?—motivated our interviews and focus groups with midcareer officers. The discussions in these sessions revealed different perceptions about the career experiences of white males compared to black males or black and white females. Despite these differences, almost all officers agreed that promotion boards objectively base their selections on the performance demonstrated in the records of the officers they evaluate. Some white officers believed that affirmative action played a role in promotion outcomes, and that minorities and women were selected more often than their records warranted. White officers often mentioned shortcomings in education and experience as factors leading to lower promotion rates among black officers. Some also suggested that commissioning standards were lower for minorities than they were for whites. These perceptions caused many black officers to feel a disproportionate need to demonstrate their competency in each assignment. Our data did not record information about college preparation or other pre-commissioning background, so we could not address these perceptions in our quantitative analysis.

Discussions with both white and black male officers suggested that black officers have greater difficulties forming the peer and mentor relationships that many observers point to as being a key component of a successful career. While we could not objectively measure differences in the ability to form and draw from such relationships, both white and black participants made it clear that a certain level of

social segregation continues to exist between the two groups. To avoid being seen as biased, many black officers hesitate to form the same close working relationships with other black officers that are common among white officers.

At the same time, participants from both groups noted that the services' assignment policies, which are perceived to disproportionately place black officers in ROTC and recruiting posts, serve to pull black males out of the usual assignments associated with their occupations. While these policies are intended to boost minority commission rates, such assignments are also thought by most to lower, not raise, officers' career trajectories.

Another hypothesis suggested to explain black-white career differences—that black officers are bid away by the private sector—was not borne out empirically. During the years that most officers leave of their own volition (before promotion to O-4), blacks are more likely, not less likely, to stay than were whites. Furthermore, survey data show almost no difference in perceived civilian job opportunities.

The interviews and focus groups revealed that women perceive limited occupational roles, concerns about harassment issues by both men and women, and competing family obligations to be the main reasons why female officers separate from the military at substantially greater rates than do men. As for black officers, these factors cause female officers to have greater difficulty forming effective peer and mentoring relationships and to hesitate to network with other women. Black female officers reported feeling that they were doubly disadvantaged, experiencing the problems of being both black and female.

Women officers continue to be concentrated in occupations perceived to offer more limited long-term career opportunities. Concentration of women in support occupations appears to have had little effect on career opportunities through the O-4 level, but female officers clearly believed that their traditional noncombat roles provided limited opportunities to advance to senior ranks, O-6 and above.

Women also suggested in the sessions that their role in the military is not fully accepted and that their physical and leadership abilities are

often questioned. Men and women participants held substantial differences of opinion over whether it is appropriate for women to serve in any combat role, including those opened in recent years to women. Many men opposed combat roles for women. In contrast, most women wanted these opportunities available to qualified women, although some women preferred the opportunity to be voluntary. All the officers we talked to stressed the importance of maintaining high qualification and performance standards for officers, particularly those with combat responsibilities. However, opinions about the ability of women to meet these standards differed.

Many women also reported having experienced some form of harassment, often early in their careers. Both men and women indicated that to avoid any possibility of a harassment charge, many men avoid close working relationships with their female colleagues and subordinates. Regardless of gender, officers prefer to handle problems within the chain of command and tend to feel that the harassment training they had received was often ineffective.

Finally, women officers in our sample noted that they face considerably different and competing family obligations than do men. Married women officers are more likely to have an employed spouse and far more likely to have a military spouse, which makes it difficult to aggressively pursue a military career. Children make that situation even more difficult.

SUGGESTIONS FOR CHANGE

Officers in our interviews and focus groups pointed to several steps the Department of Defense (DoD) could take to improve the career progress of minority male and female officers:

- Recruit more women and minorities into the officer corps and into underrepresented occupations. Officers believed that many obstacles they have faced result from their standing out in units predominantly staffed with white males.
- Better inform all officers about career-management policies, especially those dealing with race and gender.
- Avoid atypical assignment policies wherever possible.

- Ensure that criteria for assigning individuals to occupations and assignments are appropriate and applied equally.
- Reevaluate the content and frequency of harassment training. If the real objective is to promote effective teamwork and constructive conflict resolution, reorientation of training content may be appropriate.
- Develop more effective mechanisms for handling harassment complaints within the chain of command.
- Encourage family-friendly practices.
- Promote acceptance of the role defined by policy for women in the military.