Military Women: Learning Masculinities and Femininities in Communities of Practice

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Abstract: Using a life history approach, this paper explores the ways in which women in the military who are also mothers learn to embody various masculinities and femininities as they negotiate workplace gender processes. Complex intersections of gendered communities of practice result in the participants’ learning to variously understand, accept, shape, and/or resist interlinked personal, professional, and organizational gendered discourses.

Introduction

While research exists focusing on the gendered experiences of women in the military, there is little research on military women as mothers and even less using a learning lens. In particular, I could find nothing focusing on how women learn masculinities and femininities in communities of practice in military organizations. In this paper, I use these concepts to acknowledge the multitude of ways in which women learn to perform gender while extending the boundaries of adult education to focus on military gender performativity. First, I discuss theories of learning in communities of masculinity and femininity practice, exploring how they connect to the military context. Second, I explain how life history methodology enables an examination of participant learning through personal, organizational, and societal constructs. Third, I detail the findings as relates to the complex ways in which women in the military learn to embody various masculinities and femininities as they negotiate workplace gender processes. Last, I conclude that participants transgressed and reinforced certain boundaries between various military communities of masculinity and femininity.

Masculinities, Femininities, and Military Organizations

My research explores the “hidden curriculum” (Hayes & Flannery, 2000) of gender processes, such as learning about and from such diverse concepts as friendships, motherhood, masculinity, and organizational culture (Luke, 1996). My application of these theories relates to military life, exploring how female members learn to act as “women” in the military, how they learn to embody and enact certain preferred types of masculinity and femininity, and how workplace gender processes interact with their caring labour.

Paechter (2003) builds on the concept of legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), centering on learning masculinities and femininities (drawing on Butler’s (1990) exploration of the performativity of gender). Her work emphasizes that masculinities and femininities are not innate and, for the most part, are not explicitly taught to us. We learn them as we engage with the world. We may also engage in multiple femininities and masculinities (Paechter, 2003). For instance, the femininities and masculinities enacted by a woman in her everyday life as a mother may differ from those she enacts in her everyday work as a military member.

Furthermore, the idea of what counts as “feminine” and what counts as “masculine” is temporally and locally framed (although globally influenced), with full participants (as opposed to peripheral ones) having the power to define these terms (Paechter, 2006). For example, Eveline and Booth (2002) explore discourses of masculinity in work at a mining site where men resisted the presence of women as miners. Claims that women could not perform the difficult “men’s work,” such as driving “the huge computerized trucks and the difficult-to-handle 824 dozer” (p. 567) were altered when women proved successful. These trucks then became “designated as ‘women’s machines’... a number of men then refused training in the use of those machines” (p. 567). The men, as full members in the community of practice of masculine miners, held the power to redefine masculinity to continue to keep women as marginal members.

It is important to note that “masculinities and femininities, however local in focus, do not form in a vacuum; they are influenced by the mass media, popul-
lar culture, legal considerations” (Pacchter, 2003, p. 75) as they interact with familial, organizational, and societal power relations. The organizational context of the military is therefore key to the ways in which various forms of masculinity and femininity are enacted and valued.

Although many western militaries have implemented various equal opportunity employment policies in order to recruit and retain women, the small percentage of women serving does not reflect that of the countries’ respective overall populations (Goldstein, 2001). Organizational gender processes continue to perpetuate the idea that women are “second-class citizens” (Feinman, 2000), concentrating women in traditional female roles (Feinman, 2000; Winslow & Dunn, 2002), limiting women’s career advancement (Feinman, 2000), and encouraging the denigration and harassment of women (Harrison, 2002; Winslow & Dunn, 2002). Individual women have found success in western militaries, but “militarized masculinity” remains “constructed through feminized others” (Duncanson, 2009, p. 74) wherein the heterosexual male warrior remains the ideal (Basham, 2009).

The enactment of organizationally approved masculinities and femininities can become more complex for military women who become mothers. If the ideal military member is an unencumbered “masculine” warrior (Harrison, 2002; Taber, 2009b), then a military mother is not only marked as decidedly “feminine” but also as tied to a familial, domestic role (Taber, 2009a) that can inhibit combat readiness (Taber, 2005). In fact, military representations themselves have demonstrated that military mothers are perceived as women and mothers, first; military members, second (Taber, 2009a).

**Methodology**

Life history research is ideal for exploring the storied experiences of the ways in which women in the military enact various masculinities and femininities in their lives. My approach to life history research draws largely on Cole and Knowles’ (2001) work. They describe life history inquiry as “about gaining insights into the broader human condition by coming to know and understand the experiences of other humans” (p. 11). In my research, I am interested in exploring the experiences of women in military institutions. How do they learn to “walk, talk, live, and work” (p. 11) in western militaries? What is their “relationship, the complex interaction, between life and context, self and place” (p. 11) as they learn to do gender?

The construction of life history interviews is linked to “broader social and societal conditions” (Cole & Knowles, 2001, p. 12) as life history researchers explore the “intersection of institutional and individual experience” (Dhunpath, 2000, p. 544). In this case, I am particularly interested in “examining the interaction between the individual and society in the construction of gender” (Personal Narratives Group, 1989, p. 5). Participant stories, be they “narratives of acceptance,” “narratives of rebellion,” or a complex mixture of the two, “are responses to the system in which they originate and thus reveal its dynamics” (p. 8).

Multiple open-ended interviews were conducted with each participant. Interviews were transcribed with transcripts returned to participants for member-checking. Sampling was conducted via snowball, beginning from personal contacts. Participants were women with current or previous military experience in a western defence force who were also mothers. Questions focused on participants’ military experiences but not exclusively so, linking to other aspects of their lives as relevant. Plummer’s (2001) “guidelines for life story questions” (pp. 124-125), were used as entry points into participant stories. Participants were asked to consider their own life story, crafting their own general overview with a subsequent focus on their military career, important turning points, and the ways in which gender may have shaped their experiences. For this stage of the research, transcripts were analyzed using an “analysis of narrativity” (Polkinghorne, 1995), similar to that used by Gouthro (2009) in her life history research of active women citizens.

The participants were three women varying in age from early thirties to late forties, with children ranging in age from infant to young adult at the time of the interviews. All participants were married to serving male military members. Participants have served in army, navy, and air forces, and have Regular and Reserve experience, with varying ranks. Two participants have served in operational roles with another in an administrative role. Their military service ranges from 10 to 20-plus years. All three participants enjoy their work in the military and feel their service has been beneficial and successful, although they all related challenges that they faced as women in a man’s organization. Interestingly, all participants joined the military almost straight out of high school with very little understanding of military service. They wanted steady jobs and an exciting life, with two participants being

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1 Portions of the above paragraphs in this section partially draw on previously presented conference papers.
largely attracted by an all-expenses paid university education.

Findings and Discussion: Complex Intersections

The following themes were present to varying extents in all three life histories:

- men are men, women are girls
- women can do anything but must work twice as hard or work in traditional roles
- "don’t get pregnant" – women must choose between career and family
- military is a family that demands you give up control of your life for the national interest

The connecting threads in these themes include the ways in which not only these participants but other members (mostly men) perceive the service of women and mothers as different from men’s service, and the ways in which caregiving interacts with women’s service in ways atypical of men.

Men are men, women are girls

The two participants in operational roles both specifically emphasized that men and women were different. Victorine, for instance, often began statements with “girls are…” and “boys are…,” with preference often given to men’s ways of being. However, she also referred to the power of women working together, giving the example of an (almost) all-woman mission she had participated in on International Women’s Day. At the same time, she discussed women working against each other, as occurred when one of the women she works with questioned her dedication to the military because of her pregnancies. Kathy discussed how she typically preferred being friends with men than with women, stating that girls act one way and boys act another, particularly when they have disagreements. With men, she stated that they get angry, have it out, and are done with it, while girls get upset, often hide their feelings, and talk behind each others’ back. Barbara’s work itself, in an administrative support role, emphasized the differences between men and women, as she worked in units typically composed of all men, with her and a few other women performing clerking tasks. It is clear that their experiences do not reflect a gender-neutral approach by military members.

Women can do anything but must work twice as hard or work in traditional roles

The aspect of the theme that women must work twice as hard was most apparent in Kathy’s life, as she worked in a role which would be considered the most operational (long international deployments away from established bases) of the three. She had no doubt that she could indeed “do anything,” and proved it through many challenges and difficulties, but was always aware that if she were to be respected and considered competent, she needed to avoid mistakes while proving herself as tough as possible. For instance, referring to the different physical requirements for men and women in annual fitness tests, she explained how she always made sure she achieved at least the minimum male standard, so she could not be accused of only passing because female standards were easier. She also had to put up with harassment and being continually watched as one of only a few women in her role. Victorine, although in an operational role as well, was in a slightly different working environment, and felt “being a girl” was never used against her until she went on maternity leave for the second time. It was then that she felt she had to work harder to prove her dedication to the military, as it began to be questioned in often subtle but sometimes overt ways. Barbara felt her administrative role prevented her from being penalized because she was female. In her job, she was not challenging gender roles so was free to do her job as a woman in a traditional role, not as a woman in a male role.

“Don’t get pregnant” – women must choose between career and family

Kathy related how, when she first reported for duty in her operational role, she was immediately told by male peers, “Don’t get pregnant.” Her female body was already marked as different. She felt she needed prove her dedication in ways men did not, proving that she was not like other women who had purportedly served in the unit, deployed for a short time, and were posted out when they became pregnant. Years later, when Kathy decided to have children, she realized she wanted a job that was more compatible with caring for a family, stating that she felt that she was no longer career-oriented and went into “mommy mode.” In the military, she explains, if you want to serve in an operational role, progress through the ranks, and make the military a career, you cannot be a military member and a mother. Victorine correspondingly stated that you can have a military career or a family, not both. She explained that it was difficult trying to decide when to get married and when to

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2 All names are pseudonyms and any identifying information has been altered.
have children, as she and her husband tried to time these life decisions to have the least impact on the military and their own careers. Victorine feels she is now being punished for using maternal leave and explained that she will leave the military if she has to in order to keep her family together. Although stating she feels men face similar struggles, it was clear that it is women who must choose the military or family. Barbara explained that her role in administration enabled her to more easily combine children and military work, as she engaged in office work, did not take on “men’s” roles, and had good bosses who typically allowed her to be flexible when she needed time off. Barbara did discuss struggles around occasional deployments and mandated moves, particularly when she and her husband were posted to different provinces. She said that, when you get to the point where you cannot continue to meet the needs of the military above all else, you should retire.

Military as a family that demands you give up control of your life for the national interest

The three participants were caught between the two greedy institutions (Coser, 1974) of the family and the military (Segal, 1986), wherein the military is also viewed as a family, complicating abstract feelings and concrete duties of responsibility to the two institutions. Whereas all three women stated that their family was more important than the military, they agreed that absolute dedication to the military was needed. If you and your family cannot acquiesce to military needs, then it is not the military that needs to adapt. For instance, Kathy directly equated military life with family life, stating, “A typical member of the military is like any other family, except the military family knows and adapts to the needs of the employer.” She explained that, as a military member, you have no control over where you go when, but that military life has corresponding benefits, such as feelings of community and connection, as well as excellent pay and medical benefits. Victorine stated that, although she loves her job, her family comes first, and if she and her husband were to be posted to different locations, she would not hesitate to get out. Barbara had the greatest difficulties when posted to a base in one province, with young children, while her husband was posted to another. She felt that the military was trying to push her out, refusing her many requests to be posted together in order to precipitate her retirement. Now that her children are older, she is considering a “voluntary” posting apart, in order to meet both her and her husband’s career needs. At the same time as lamenting the fact that they have to choose between the military and their own family, participants hold unquestioning loyalty to the military as a first priority, agreeing that anyone who cannot put the military first has no place as a military member. There was no corollary argument that those who could not put their family first had no place as a family member, although each participant personally felt they would choose to resign if they had to choose between the military and their family.

Implications

Using Paechter’s (2003, 2006) concept of learning in communities of masculinity and femininity practice, the participants transgressed and reinforced certain boundaries between various communities. Being a member of a community of masculinity practice (typically equated with being male) seemed to equal being a member of the community of military practice, resulting in legitimate participation, whether peripheral (for newcomers) or full (for oldtimers). Being a member of a community of femininity practice (typically equated with being female) does not entail exclusion from being a member of a community of military practice, but the relationship between the communities results in more peripheral participation, with problematic access to full participation, which is arguably closer to marginal (illegitimate) participation than to legitimate peripheral participation. The women participants here often overlapped communities, sometimes choosing to be in one over another (as evidenced by the theme that men are men and women are girls), fighting for acceptance in one particular community (women can do anything but must work twice as hard), or being forced out (women must choose career or family as military interests take priority). Although the participants each saw challenges in being women in the military, they did so in various ways according to their own unique backgrounds, personalities, experiences, and contexts. Each accepted the fact that the military should come first, but discussed the difficulties of doing this while being dedicated to their families. It was clear that family needs were perceived as their own personal concerns, not the military’s. This research demonstrates the complexities in the lives of women in non-traditional roles, framing their learning experiences as interacting with organizational constructs and demands, highlighting the continued importance of exploring gender processes.
References


